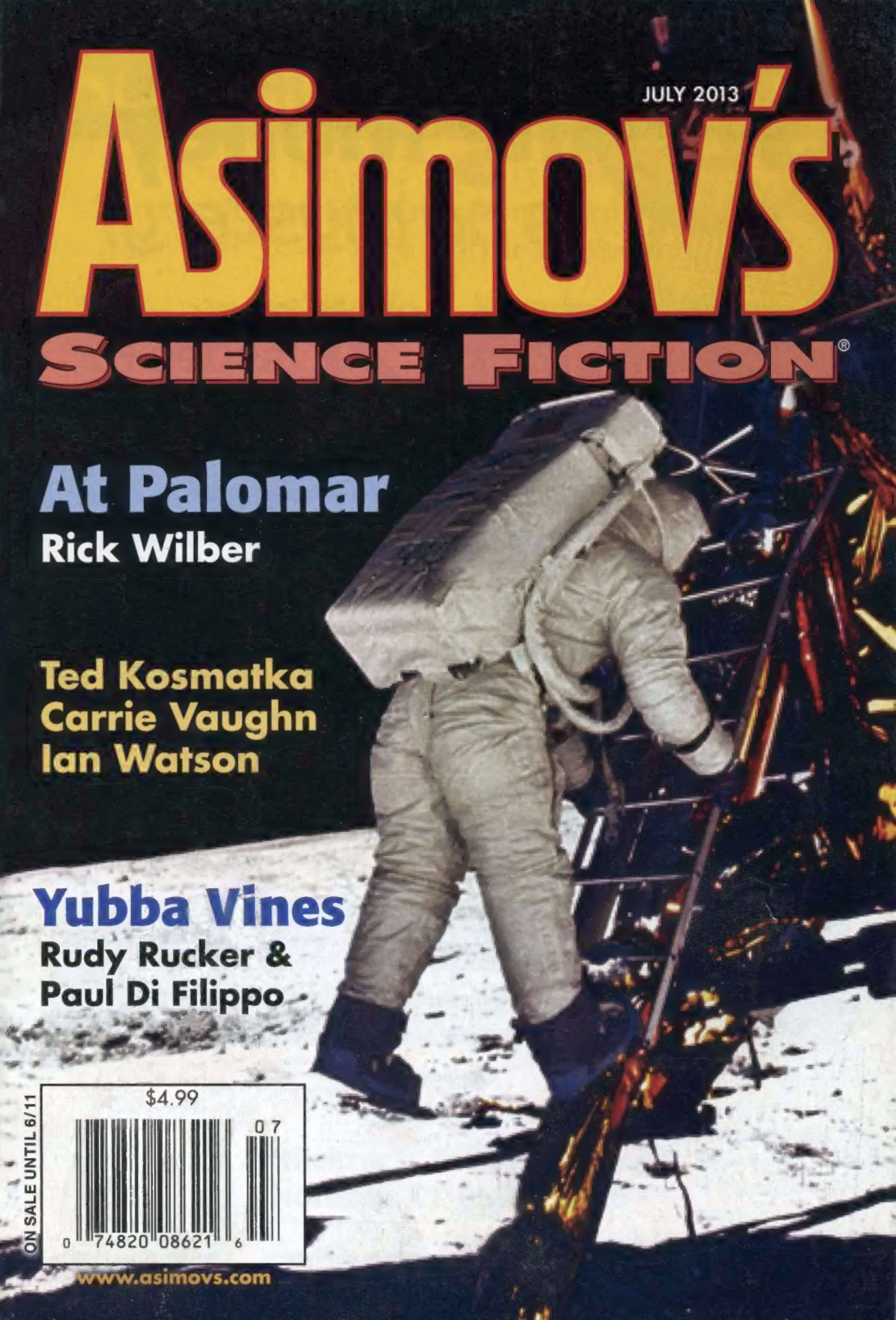
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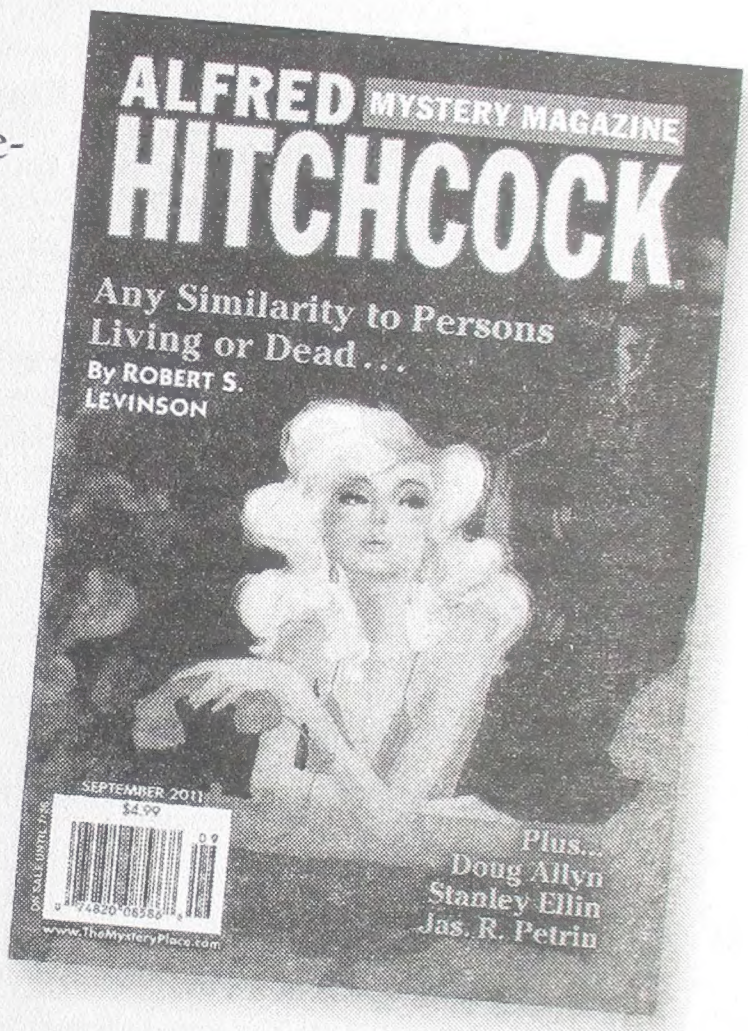

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Asimov's Science Fiction

JULY 2013

Vol. 37 No. 7 (Whole Number 450)
Next Issue on Sale June 11, 2013

Cover Art by Apollo 11 Moon Landing/NASA

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Asimov's Science Fiction. ISSN 1065-2698. Vol. 37, No. 7. Whole No. 450, July 2013. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription $55.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $70.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction,* 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, N.Y. 10007. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications.

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Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction,* 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quad/Graphics Joncas, 4380 Garand, Saint-Laurent, Quebec H4R 2A3.

Printed by Quad/Graphics, Taunton, MA USA (4/15/13)

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EDITORIAL

Sheila Williams

LUNA'S FIRST HEROES

I have a fading color photograph of my three sisters and myself on the night of July 20, 1969. The photo must have been damaged in the camera. There is a swath of white obstructing the bottom of the picture, yet the image clearly shows the four of us lying on the floor of our parents' bedroom watching TV. At three, even the youngest of us is fixated with what appears to be a blank screen. What's playing is no mystery, though. It's Neil Armstrong about to become the first human being to set foot on the Moon.

Tensing Norgay and Edmund Hillary reached the summit of Mt. Everest three years before I was born. They were heroes to my father, but their deed seemed as distant to me as Roald Amundsen's 1926 expedition to the South Pole. As a twelve-year-old, I could appreciate their valor, just as I could appreciate the ultimate price paid by George Mallory and Robert Falcon Scott in their quests to push the bounds of human endurance and discovery. Still, these deeds were all acts of history, their outcomes were known. They weren't going to keep me up half the night tingling with excitement.

At four and five, I'd been too young to grasp the enormity of Yuri Gargarin, Alan Shepherd, and John Glenn's accomplishments in space. At twelve, I was caught up in the mania for the first voyage to the Moon that swept most of the United States.

My friends and I all had our favorite Beatle and our favorite Star Trek character, and I'm sure we each had a favorite astronaut as well. Michael Collins, the man with the loneliest job in the solar system, was mine. Solo and sometimes out of contact with the other astronauts and Earth, he would be the one piloting *Columbia,* Apollo 11's command module, around the Moon while the other men claimed the surface and the glory. Family lore held that we were related by his marriage to a distant cousin.

Still, despite my loyalty to my alleged cousin-in-law, it was obvious that the two men with the most exciting jobs in the universe were lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin, and mission commander, Neil Armstrong. The commander later said, "I always knew there was a good chance of being able to return to Earth, but I thought the chances of a successful touchdown on the Moon surface were about even money—fifty-fifty. . . . Most people don't realize how difficult the mission was."

The public was concerned with their safety. We were worried that the *Eagle,* the lunar landing module, would sink into mounds of Moon dust, or fail to lift off for its assignation with the command module. The astronauts and NASA all appeared so confident and competent, though, that mostly we were reassured that the men would be returning to Earth without incident.

Along with the rest of the world, I have waited breathlessly to see human ingenuity, bravery, and perseverance successfully rescue Baby Jessica from a Texas well, and thirty-three Chilean copper miners from their sixty-nine day ordeal under ground. In 2002, I burst unexpectedly into tears when I picked up my newspaper and learned that after seventy-eight hours, all nine coalminers had been located and rescued from the Quecreek mine in Pennsylvania. These events may be the only ones in my conscious lifetime that carried the same emotional resonance as watching NASA put men on the Moon and safely bring them back home.

There are big differences between waiting for unfortunate people to be rescued from unforeseen circumstances and watching the Apollo astronauts explore the Moon. The astronauts were on a well-planned adventure. They had bravely chosen their lot and their voyage was the result of the work of thousands of well-trained scientists and engineers. In the wake of Apollo 13's ill-fated journey and

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the *Challenger* and *Columbia* disasters, we are more aware of the hazards of space travel. Yet, even in 1969 we knew these men were heroes. Space and the Moon were a huge unknown. Anyone willing to be strapped to a Saturn V rocket and blasted into orbit had to be among our most courageous.

Eventually, I had a chance to meet the gregarious Buzz Aldrin. The retired astronaut had co-written a science fiction novel, *Encounter With Tiber*, with John Barnes. Soon after it came out, Colonel Aldrin attended the Science Fiction Writers of America's annual New York reception for authors and editors. It was a thrill to shake hands with a man who had left his boot prints on the Moon.

Alas, like nearly everyone else, my path never crossed Neil Armstrong's. Upon his death last summer, his family released a statement that said he was "a reluctant American hero who always believed he was just doing his job. He served his Nation proudly, as a navy fighter pilot, test pilot, and astronaut." They added, "While we mourn the loss of a very good man, we also celebrate his remarkable life and hope that it serves as an example to young people around the world to work hard to make their dreams come true, to be willing to explore and push the limits, and to selflessly serve a cause greater than themselves."

I have always thought that NASA chose well the first man on the moon. When reporters repeatedly asked whether Edmund Hillary or Tenzing Norgay was the first person to summit Mount Everest, Colonel John Hunt, the expedition leader, answered, "They reached it together, as a team." Millions of people watched as Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on Earth's traveling companion, but this daring astronaut always seemed to recognize that his great achievement was due to a tremendous team effort.

Humans have been enchanted by Luna since the dawn of time. The passing of Neil Armstrong gives us one more opportunity to celebrate a hero and to honor everyone who pushed the limits and successfully transported our astronauts from the Earth to the Moon. ❍

IN MEMORIAM

Steven Utley

1948-2013

The science fiction field lost a sharp and perceptive voice when Steven Utley died from cancer on January 12, 2013. Steven started publishing fiction in 1972. During *Asimov's* first year, he contributed two poems and a short story to the magazine and he went on to sell us dozens more of each.

Steven liked to call himself the "Internationally Unknown Author," and it is true that his collections of short stories were never best-sellers. Yet, his works appeared in most of the major SF markets. His best-known tales were set deep in the pre-dinosaur Silurian era. The first of these, "There and Then," was published in *Asimov's* in 1993. The newest collections of these stories are *The 400-Year-Itch* (2012) and *Invisible Kingdoms* (Spring 2013). Both books are available from Ticonderoga Publications.

Not all of Steven's stories were set in the distant past. In tales like "Race Relations" and "The Glowing Cloud," he wrote about social injustice and the sad consequences of human folly. Every penny that he made from his 1992 story, "Haiti," was spent in support of humanitarian aid organizations.

A few of his stories and poems even concerned the future. His most recent *Asimov's* tale, "Shattering," was about a man's lonely interstellar journey. Steven's email address was taken from his poem "This Impatient Ape." Published in *Asimov's* in 1997, it was also the title poem of one of his collections of poetry. Steven called himself a "cranky old secular humanist," but I'd like to believe that somehow he's finally found a way to visit with the folks in Andromeda.

—Sheila Williams

This Impatient Ape
by Steven Utley

Andromeda's light,
as ancient as mastodons,
travels too slowly.

This impatient ape
wants to see what the folks there
are doing right now.

(Copyright © 1997 by Steven Utley. Used by permission.)

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

JOHN FRUM, HE COME

A pernicious scam—a hoax that might be said to have taken on some aspects of a Messianic cult—spread through the United States during the scorching summer of 2012, when thousands of people convinced themselves that the American government was willing to pay up to one thousand dollars toward their utility bills. East and west, north and south, the joyous news spread across the Internet and by automated telephone calls, by text messages, and even by the quaint old process of stuffing printed fliers into your mailbox. People made haste to tell their friends about it through Facebook and the other social media.

It all sounded very plausible, too. Our benevolent government, deeply concerned about the utility-payment crisis at a time of such economic difficulty across the land, had supposedly set aside a huge fund to help out with the bills. All you had to do, upon learning of this wondrous new benefit, was to supply a little personal information: your Social Security number, your credit-card number, your checking-account number. You would then be given a bank routing number and checking-account number to use when paying your next utility bill. The fake number would be rejected by the bank within a day or two, but meanwhile the scammers would be busy cleaning out your bank account or going to town with your credit card.

The scheme worked particularly well in New Jersey, where ten thousand customers of Public Service Electric & Gas fell for it, despite warnings from the utility and various government agencies. The trouble was that nobody seems to pay much attention to such warnings, whereas the happy reports of the bonanza spread rapidly through all the electronic media that make communication of misinformation such an easy matter in the modern world. People hear what they want to hear. A PSEG spokesman said that the victims thought it was "a legitimate federally sponsored program, and, of course, that can become confusing, because there *are* legitimate federally sponsored programs."

It became confusing, all right. Two thousand customers of Entergy Corp. in Louisiana and Texas signed up for their government checks, as did fifteen hundred customers of Duke Energy in the Carolinas, and bunches of others in Wisconsin, Mississippi, Michigan, and Iowa. How many more were duped before the con men called off their campaign is uncertain, but the total damage probably was considerable.

In a country where, as the PSEG spokesman said, "there *are* legitimate federally sponsored programs," and new ones have been proposed regularly as the financial crisis that began in 2008 deepened, it is reasonable to expect people bedeviled by debt on all sides to grasp at such straws without stopping to consider that the administrators of legitimate federal programs would very likely not need to have their checking-account numbers and surely would have no need for their credit-card numbers. Evidently there are no limits to contemporary gullibility, though. The whole episode summons to mind a somewhat similar adventure in optimism that spread through in the islands of the South Pacific in the early twentieth century and came to have the general name of the cargo-cult religion: the belief that a messiah from the heavens would come to the islanders, bringing them their share of the material wealth that European colonial settlers so obviously enjoyed.

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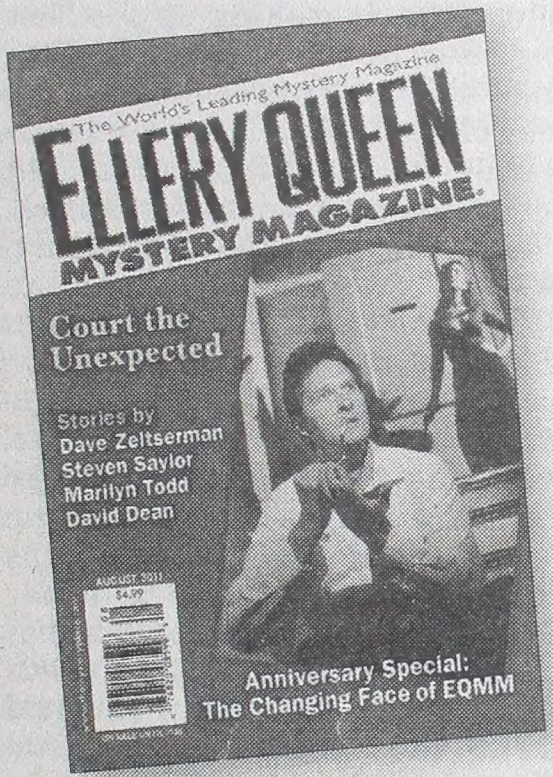

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The earliest of the cargo cults seems to have arisen on New Guinea, where the myth of a culture-hero named Mansren originated as far back as 1857. It was said that Mansren, a mysterious figure who was creator of the islands and their peoples, had sailed off into the stars long ago, but now was due to return, bringing with him all the dead ancestors, and inaugurate an apocalyptic age of miracles. The black Papuan natives would turn white, the white European settlers would turn black, and ships would arrive to bring the people the fabulous goods that only the white people had previously had—knives, guns, lamps, clothes, bicycles, and ever so much more, the much-coveted "cargo" for which the islanders longed. After that, a golden age would begin for the islands, in which the whites would leave, old age, illness, and death would likewise disappear, there would be no further need for anyone to work, and the islanders would enjoy riches and good health to the end of time.

Since the Mansren myth had certain aspects that paralleled Christianity—it included the virgin birth of a miraculous child, engendered by Mansren by magical means—the Christian missionaries who came to New Guinea in the late nineteenth century chose not to make any very strenuous attempts to suppress it, thinking that belief in Mansren might provide an easy transition to belief in the Christian God. What it led to, though, was an expansion of belief in Mansren, or in similar mythical figures known by other names, who would, like Mansren, appear out of the sky bearing the rich gifts that were generally known as "cargo."

Throughout the 1930s the cargo cult spread from island to island, updated now to specify delivery by airplane of such modern marvels as radios and telephones. One place where it became solidly rooted was the island group called Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides: when American troops landed there in the early years of World War II they found the natives hard at work building what they said were roads, docks, and airfields in preparation for the arrival of the magical ships and planes that would bring the cargo treasures from America. The newly arrived troops did indeed come with immense quantities of cargo—the military supplies out of which they would build the bases they needed for the battle against Japan—and distributed small gifts to the natives of the island, and all this helped to reinforce the hope that the promised savior was on his way. It was on Tanna, one of the eighty islands making up the New Hebrides, that the cult messiah acquired the name of John Frum—perhaps because one of the GIs had introduced himself to them as "John from America." Many of the incoming troops were black, which led to the belief that John Frum himself was a black man, and the slogan "John Frum, he come" spread through the land.

To hasten the coming of the cargo the islanders discarded their recently adopted western ways, thinking that they were offensive to the cargo gods. They gave up European dress, reverting to loincloths and body paint; they threw their money into the sea; and in their confidence that once the cargo had arrived all their needs would be provided for, they abandoned their farms and slaughtered their livestock. They erected mock radio antennae made of bamboo and rope to pick up announcements of the journey of the cargo-bearers to their island, and stockpiled great mounds of firewood to see them through the three promised days of darkness that would precede the millennial moment. They held great dance festivals at which they implored the cargo gods to come, erecting wooden altars to which they brought flowers and other offerings, and they spent hours staring out to sea or looking up into the sky, searching for the vessels that were to bring the miraculous gifts.

John Frum did not come. Now and then a false messiah would arise, claiming to be he, and the European colonial authorities would arrest him and transport him to some other island. The chief

impact of this was to intensify the development of these messianic cults throughout the region. Anthropologists have identified a host of such movements: the Taro Cult of New Guinea, the Tuka Cult of the Fiji Islands, the Vailala Madness of Papua, and many more. They still thrive today on some islands, for believers in messianic cults can be patient people. In the Vanuatu archipelago, February 15 is celebrated every year as John Frum Day, the day on which he will eventually arrive. There is ceremonial dancing, the altars are decorated, sacred relics of the wartime occupation such as military dog-tags and soldiers' helmets are brought forth and displayed. Some years ago Chief Isaac Wan Nikiau, then the leader of the John Frum Movement, was quoted as saying that John Frum was "our God, our Jesus," and would eventually return. By now the movement seems to have become political and cosmopolitan: its leader, as of December 2011, was Thitam Goiset, a woman of Vietnamese origin whose brother, Dinh Van Than, is a powerful local businessman.

I'm pretty sure that the cargo-cult phenomenon inspired more than one science fictional story, with the scene transferred to some lush, bejungled alien planet where the "natives" pray daily for the arrival of a spaceship bearing marvelous cargo for them. I even may have written such a story myself. (So many stories, so long ago: I have some difficulty now in remembering all the work I did fifty-odd years back.) Certainly it would have been a logical theme for the pseudo-anthropological SF that was so popular in the 1950s.

It's easy, of course, to chuckle at the idea that the simple native folk of these islands may still be painting their faces, beating the tribal drums, and imploring mysterious gods to bring them television sets and smartphones aboard gleaming airplanes descending from the heavens. But we ought not to be too condescending here. What is the utility-bill scam of 2012 but the naïve belief that our benign government will reach out to suffering citizens and pay the cost of those unusual air-conditioning bills of that torrid summer? How many millions, or is it billions, of dollars do Americans ship every year to places like Nigeria and Kazakhstan and Mali in the naïve and never to be fulfilled hope that a cargo of money will come thundering into their bank accounts from some far-off benefactor? John Frum, he will not come. But variations on the cargo-cult dream have been with us since the earliest days of humanity, and, I suspect, they will still be acquiring followers when the sun is a mere dim red ball in the dark chilly sky of the end of days. ❍

Shifts in Production

The last human CEO
has just resigned.
Forced retirement is rumored.

And now the finest tailors
work only in metal.

—Bruce Boston

HAPLOTYPE 1402

Ted Kosmatka

Ted's work has been reprinted in nine Year's Best anthologies and nominated for both the Nebula and Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. His last contribution to *Asimov's*, "Blood Dauber," written with Michael Poore, won the 2010 Asimov's Readers' Choice Award. Although the inspiration for his terrifying new tale may owe much to his career as a lab tech, in recent years, his writing has led him away from that occupation. Ted is now a full-time video game writer at Valve where he's been hard at work on Dota 2. The author's first novel, *The Games*, came out in 2012. His second novel, *Prophet of Bones*, was released in April.

Nathan saw the bull before it saw him.

On small things are lives hinged.

He froze, stomach to the dirt, tasting grit and blood. He fought the urge to vomit. A dozen feet away, his wrecked cycle chugged, sputtered, died—its back wheel spinning crookedly from where the bike had embedded itself in the woven wire fence.

What the hell just happened?

He eyed the bull, trying to piece together the sequence of the last few moments, but whole parts were missing. Whole parts *must* have been missing. He squinted, trying to clear his aching head, but the memories were jumbled. He'd been on a scouting mission ahead of the caravan, checking the hills for ambushes. That much he knew for sure. After that, things got fuzzy. He remembered riding off-road, skimming a ridge along a stand of scrubby pine, then—a drop. He remembered a drop, and the ground rearing up at him. Now an angry bull stomped the earth a couple of yards away.

Somewhere close a dog barked. The bull snorted and advanced on the fallen motorcycle, attracted by the snaking wheel. It lunged—huge skull slamming into the rear of the cycle, and the whole fence shook under the force of the impact. The beast flung its neck and the cycle jerked free with a twist of horns. Nathan rolled away, scrambling to his feet. Where the hell was he?

Around him the fences seemed to multiply. The next pen held several sheep, the pen beyond that, pigs. In the distance, a ramshackle house leaned toward a withered stand of corn.

A farm then. He had—somehow—ended up in the middle of a working farm.

He'd never expected to see one again.

On the other side of the fence, the dog went berserk, its shrill barking joined by

equally frantic shouts from a lanky farmer in filthy overalls who sprinted across the dusty yard.

Nathan turned, and a short limestone bluff loomed above him, shaded in pine. It wasn't much of a drop, maybe ten feet. Understanding washed over him.

Shit.

New fencing was hard to come by since the big sick. A natural ridge of limestone worked as a perimeter and would provide some shelter from the wind during the cold winters. The farmer had fenced his livestock against the rise, and in the lengthening shadows of evening, Nathan had ridden over the edge.

A black surge grabbed his attention as the bull struck the damaged cycle again, flinging the three-hundred-pound dirt bike off the point of its horn. The front wheel folded, rubber tire coming loose from the rim. Over the sound of barking, the farmer screamed in rage. Something unintelligible. Curses, most likely.

The bull turned its head toward Nathan—its backside swiveling fluidly around to point the entire beast at him. It wasn't a large bull, as bulls go. Maybe a thousand pounds, but Nathan knew that human ribs were probably incapable of appreciating the fine distinction between a skinny half-ton yearling, and an eighteen-hundred-pound Angus. A ribcage would splinter the same either way.

The bull charged. Nathan bolted for the fence and hit it chest high, pulling his legs over. He actually *felt* the point of the bull's horn on his calf, actually smelled its humid breath, and then he was up and over. He landed hard, knocking his wind loose.

The dog was on him in an instant, snarling and snapping at his head as he tried to regain his feet. The farmer came around, his filthy shirt splayed open to reveal a strong, wiry torso. He brandished a long wooden hoe.

"Fuera de aquí!"

"Hey!" Nathan shouted. "Hold on a minute; call off your dog."

"Ladrón! Ladrón!"

The man shook the hoe aggressively. The dog snapped at Nathan's arm. For about the ten thousandth time since the TDR, he wished he'd taken Spanish in Mrs. Gonzales's class in seventh grade. But Chinese, his counselor had told him, was the language of the future. She hadn't counted on the there not being one.

The dog's teeth sank into his calf.

"Shit!"

Nathan kicked the mutt away and tried to stand, but the angry farmer shoved him. He landed on his butt, falling against the fence.

"Hey!" Nathan shouted. "Hands off."

The dog bit him twice in quick succession, and the farmer raised the hoe. Behind him, a half-naked little girl walked calmly across the dust, fingers in her mouth, watching them.

Nathan felt a jab from behind and remembered the gun tucked into the small of his back—Doc Hunter required all outriders to carry arms. Nathan didn't want to pull the gun if he could help it. He tried to kick the dog off, but it sank its teeth into the side of his foot. His flesh tore; pain lanced through him.

"Fuck!" Enough was enough.

Nathan yanked the Sig from his waistband. And here's the thing about dogs. They don't know when they've got a gun pointed at them. In this way, they're different from men.

The dog lunged again, teeth snapping bloodily. Nathan had no choice. His finger found the trigger. *Crack, crack, crack.* He managed to avoid shooting his own foot, and the dog slumped. The farmer's eyes widened, hoe still held in rough approximation of a batting stance.

Nathan brought the gun up to the farmer's face.

The man dropped the hoe and backed away, arms out, palms exposed in the universal sign of capitulation. Behind him, the half-naked girl screamed. She looked about six—old enough to know what a gun was, maybe. Or old enough to recognize the fear in her father's eyes. Old enough, in this time, in this place, to have seen too much death already. Tears cleaned streaks into her filthy face. Nathan could count the ribs on her bare torso. Her dark eyes swam crazily, and Nathan wondered how many times in the coming years she might see this moment in her dreams: her father held at gunpoint.

If she were lucky.

Nathan's hand shook, but he didn't lower the weapon. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Nine Inch Nails shrieked. He couldn't touch a gun without hearing it. Not after Perryton. Luke had been blasting them from the truck speakers when the shooting started. Now it was the sound in Nathan's nightmares.

Nathan took a step back, then another, glancing around for other family members who might materialize out of the woodwork. He saw no one. Just these two. When he passed the edge of the fence, he sprinted into the pines, heading back toward the caravan. It was a long time before the music left him in silence.

The walk back to the caravan took most of the night. He backtracked the way he'd come, across a trickling little river bed, through a shuttered old no-streetlight town, windows broken out, doorways standing open like knocked out teeth. And past that, a half-dozen more miles, to the camp. As Nathan expected, Luke was still up, pacing around the fire.

"Boy, what the hell happened to you?" Luke's face was blank, unreadable, as Nathan entered the glowing circle of the campfire. At seventeen, Nathan was the youngest of them by a dozen years, but only Luke called him boy. Nathan glanced around, but the two of them were alone. The others were in the vehicles, sleeping.

"I crashed the bike. There was a farmer."

"Farmer?"

Nathan told him what happened, expecting him to be angry about the motorcycle—the bike, after all, had been property of the caravan. Its loss was a punishable offense. But Luke said only, "You rode off a cliff?"

"Just a small one."

"And landed in a bull pen?"

"Yeah."

"Boy, you got the luck, ain't you. How far away is this farmer?"

"Hours. A whole night's walk past the next town."

"You see anything we need to worry about up ahead?"

Nathan shook his head. "Nothing. The same as it's been. Except for the farmer."

Luke stirred the fire with a stick. "The doc ain't gonna be happy, but you know that already. Now find your sack and get some rest."

By the time Nathan slid into his sleeping bag, the sky was showing the first hints of light back toward Texas—or what used to be Texas, Nathan reminded himself. He was still trying to get used to the new lines on the map. He was still trying to get used to a lot of things.

The caravan was down to three vehicles now. Two trucks and an RV. Not what you could call a caravan at all, really. Just these four men, in addition to himself. Doc, Luke, Marco, and Elias.

There used to be more. Back before Perryton. Before Osage.

Doc Hunter rode with Luke in the big RV—a twenty-six-foot Winnebago they'd picked up in Tankawa, just outside the reservation. Elias rode in an old four-by-four pickup. Marco drove the little S-10. Nathan mostly rode the cycle. He preferred it

that way. Scouting ahead, staying out of the Doc's sight. The safest thing, all things considered.

It had happened twice, back when their numbers were greater.

Nathan had ridden ahead of the caravan, and when he'd circled back to find the group at the end of the day, they were fewer. The last time, it had been Andrew, the other kid his age. A kid who couldn't keep his mouth shut. A kid who wasn't good at staying out of Doc's sight.

"Where's Andrew?" Nathan had asked, when he pulled up on the bike.

"He ain't here no more," the doc had said.

"What do you mean?"

"He left."

"Where?"

And the doc had pointed a huge arm back down the rutted track they'd come. "Back there, sixty, eighty miles or so."

And that's all he said about it. Nathan had sat on his bike, feeling the engine idle beneath him. A steady rumble. He could go, he knew. He could ride back the way they'd come, follow the tracks. Find him. Dead, or not dead.

The Doc's eyes narrowed, as if seeing his thoughts.

"Turn the bike off," the doc said, holding out his hand for the keys.

The engine rumbled. Nathan could have done it. Could have ridden away.

Instead he put his hand on the key. He turned the ignition, and the rumble went silent. He put the keys in the doc's hand.

Nathan woke to the crackling of fire. He sat up, and Marco gave him a scarred grimace over his half-eaten breakfast of two-day-old snake. The grimace was what passed for a smile. The shotgun blast hadn't killed him, Marco had explained once, rubbing his puckered cheek. "But it damn sure ruined my day." Now he wore the scar like a badge: *shoot me, and I still won't die.*

The breakfast looked revolting, and smelled worse, but the caravan was running short of food. "You got in late."

"Yeah," Nathan said.

"I don't see no bike."

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"I lost it."

"The dentist ain't gonna like that."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Nathan shook himself free of his sleeping bag and moved closer to the fire.

When Nathan had first joined the caravan, there'd been talk about just what kind of doctor the doc was exactly. He'd never come out and said. One rumor was that he was a dentist. "On account of his teeth," Andrew had speculated. Then he explained, "It's like plumbers. At home, they always have fucked up toilets, you know?"

"Not gonna like that one bit," Marco continued, holding out the pan of crispy snake. "You better see him."

"I'll see him when he wants me to see him." Nathan grabbed the crispiest chunk of snake he could get his fingers on. The grease burned his fingers. It tasted like charcoal.

"Ayeh. That you will."

Nathan walked to the S-10 to hustle up some water for his leg. He pulled a jug from the truck bed and washed his calf where the dog had bitten him. The water was murky brown, collected from a stream three days earlier. He glanced into the truck's side mirror. The mirror wasn't kind. The whole side of his face was raw. After cleaning the wounds, he inspected the bites. They didn't look good.

Nathan limped back to the fire. By then the doc was awake and sitting beneath the awning of the RV, big hands swallowing up the armrests of his flimsy plastic lawn chair. Luke stood next to him. The two were talking about something. A few minutes later, Luke called out, "Hey boy, come here."

Nathan came.

"How's your leg?" was the first thing the doc said. Even in the shade of the awning he squinted, pale eyes nested within knots of skin beneath bushy, steel-gray eyebrows. Doc was soft spoken for the most part. He never raised his voice, settling for the hands-on approach, if it came down to it. He wore his gun on his lap, though he'd hardly need it. He was the biggest of them by a wide margin. Maybe fifty years old, six foot three. His broken teeth gave him a look of jagged ferocity. A shark's smile.

"Been better."

"Let's see."

Nathan pulled up his torn pant leg.

"Come closer," Doc said. He eyed the wound closely.

"How long ago did this happen?" he asked, probing the wound with a bare, dark finger.

"Yesterday."

"I know yesterday," he snapped. "Yesterday when? How many hours ago?"

"I don't know, eighteen hours or so, I guess."

Doc shook his head. "Next time something like this happens, you let me know immediately."

"Okay."

"Don't sleep on it."

"Okay."

"This dog that bit you, how was it acting?"

"Pissed off."

"Any foam around its mouth?"

"No, nothing like that," Nathan said. "It was healthy."

"When was your last tetanus?"

"Two years ago."

"Hmm." Doc bent forward and examined the wound again. "We're going to need to

scrub this out. Puncture wounds are the worst; they tend to fester. We're out of Betadine and low on the rest of the antiseptics, so it'll just have to be soap and hot water. Was a time you wouldn't need to be so careful. Now those days are past."

Nathan nodded his head.

The TDR.

Totally drug-resistant.

A strain of TB that resisted all forms of antibiotics.

Now the only people left were those with natural resistance, or the slowly dying. The world had been dying now for twenty-three months.

"Will it sting?"

"Not as bad as gangrene, or the subsequent amputation. Cutting your whole foot off would *really* sting. You sure this dog wasn't sick?"

"It was healthy."

"Just because it looked healthy doesn't mean it was. An unprovoked attack can be a sign of disease."

"It wasn't unprovoked. I provoked it. It was a farmer's dog. I think the farmer told it to attack me, but I don't know for sure."

Doc raised an eyebrow, so Nathan told the whole story. Told about the bull, and the pigs, and the corn.

"Well," Doc said as he finished scrubbing out the wound. "It sounds like a few dog bites was the better of two evils. I'd rather face a dog than a two-ton bull."

"The bull wasn't all that big. In fact, it was kinda scrawny. For a bull, I mean."

Nathan thought a lot about the bull as he limped back to the S-10 and climbed in the back. Could bulls get the TDR? In all the time they'd been wandering, even before the reservation, and what happened in Perryton, they hadn't come across any livestock. When the farmers had died, so did their animals. What was left was deer and wild game. Things you could hunt.

A few minutes later, Elias and Jacob climbed into the big four-by-four. Marco climbed in the S-10. The vehicles rumbled to life, and Marco shifted the truck into gear. The caravan rolled on.

"So now you ride with me, eh?"

"Looks like."

"You had this whole empty place to ride, and you still crashed your bike."

"It was the farm," Nathan said. "I wasn't expecting it."

"You said there was a bull. Were there other things, too?"

"Yeah."

"Does the Doc know that?"

"Yeah, I told him."

"And it's up ahead, the way we're going?"

"Yeah."

Marco was silent for a minute. "Tell me about this farm."

Nathan hadn't grown up on a farm, but he'd spent summers at his uncle's place as a kid. He'd slopped hogs and milked cows. When he was twelve, he'd raised rabbits, too, and sold them at the county fair. One summer, he'd saved up and gotten his hands on a couple of Flemish Giants—red-brown rabbits roughly the size of cocker spaniels. They were freaks of the rabbit world. After he'd gotten several litters out of the pair, he'd crossed one of the giants to a tiny mini-lop dwarf just to see how the bunnies would turn out. The results were fascinating, if not altogether surprising. Ordinary rabbits. Just normal, ordinary rabbits.

That place, those summers; they had been an escape for him. An escape from all

the expectations he'd never lived up to. It did him good to be on the farm. He liked to think it was in his blood, even if there was precious little evidence for it.

With a name like Anderson, Nathan never had to guess about his roots. And although he knew that Swedes *did* come in colors other than red and blonde, and in sizes other than extra large, he never would have learned that from his father's side of the family. Nathan's paternal grandmother had always seemed inordinately proud of her brood of Viking caricatures. She'd borne an even half-dozen in her time—blue-eyed boys and girls as overgrown as they were under pigmented. The Andersons of that generation were framed long and slung in beef—big, meaty hands and big arms and big shoulders. Big, meaty legs, and chests, and asses. They were tall and nothing you'd call fat, but just thick—and there's a difference.

Nathan's mother had been as small as his father was large. She was thin and dark—some parts Irish, some parts Cherokee if the rumors were true, but most parts just plain scrawny hill folk three generations deep from the backcountry of West Virginia.

Nathan had his father's pale complexion and square, even features, if none of his tendency toward Nordic pituitary excess. Nathan was a normal-sized rabbit. As out of place among his grandmother's Viking brood as he was in the caravan that had brought death to Perryton.

The sound of gunfire snapped Nathan from his daydream. He sat up straight, neck aching from how he'd been sitting with his head against the window.

Luke was shooting again.

Plinking shots against an old signpost.

They were parked in the center of town. It looked different by day. Even more dead, somehow, if that were possible.

Elias had a garden hose stuck into the side of minivan.

Gas there was plenty of. Siphoned as they went.

And cars, plenty. Ammunition, guns. Plenty. Picked up here and there.

People though were fewer.

And food least of all.

Nathan pushed open the truck door and stretched his legs.

By the time he'd laced his boots up, Elias had capped the big metal gas can and was lugging it over to the pickup. Nathan walked over to help, and together they lifted the can up onto the bed of the four-by-four with the rest of the supply. They stood back to look at their collected worldly goods.

It wasn't pretty.

Nathan counted the cans. They'd burned through nearly half their gas. They'd burned through the food even quicker. A hundred feet across the empty intersection, he saw the doc standing by the RV, watching them.

"I miss my bike," Nathan said.

"You make friends wherever you go?" Marco asked.

"That farmer could have helped me. We could have got my bike out before the bull trashed it."

"Why would he do that? You shot his dog."

"It was biting me."

"That's because the farmer probably told it to bite you."

Nathan slammed the tailgate closed. "Then the farmer should have thought twice," he said.

"That dog was probably used for driving the sheep. No dog, and the sheep run away, get lost, get eaten. No sheep dog," he said, "then maybe there's no sheep. You think of that?"

"No."

"This farmer, he had a girl, you said? Where's his wife? You didn't see her, that means she's dead. And others, too, probably. His whole family. Not enough food now, maybe daughter dies next."

"He still shouldn't have set his dog on me."

"Some stranger comes in *your* livestock pen, what you think? You think he comes to steal? Or think he wants to play with the bull?"

That night Nathan lay awake for a long time in the bed of the truck. He'd seen enough to recognize the truth in Marco's words. There was a fine line between subsistence farming and starvation. Outside the reservations, the world had ended. The reservations were the only places where any kind of civility reigned. Anything approaching laws, or civilization. The first nations governed themselves.

The caravan was on its way across Oklahoma, to the four corners. Across the emptied lands.

Emptied of people. Emptied of food.

But here and there, some still hung on. Others came from the South, where the die-off hadn't been so extreme. Driven north by fighting.

Many would probably starve next year.

Maybe the difference would be one failed crop. Maybe one stolen bull. That single scrawny bovine probably represented the best chance that farmer had. And Nathan *had* been in its pen.

Nathan finally gave up on sleep and sat up on the rusty wheel well. The night breeze was cool and sweet, and the moon was out, bleaching color from the grassy field that stretched toward the dark trees on the ridge. At night, the valley was beautiful, a wide-open expanse. A coyote yipped somewhere out in the distance.

Nathan thought about the dog he'd killed—big, black and tan. Maybe the last dog for a hundred miles. The land belonged to the coyotes now.

They drove through the hottest part of the day, three lumbering vehicles in the hot scrubland. Nathan recognized the route he'd taken on his bike. The line of hills. Out here the country was windy. The steady, relentless roll of the wheels ate up the distance. He saw the exact point up ahead where he'd left the road on his bike—saw his own tracks in the dirt, heading up to the ridge. Up ahead, leading the way, the RV seemed to slow, or maybe he just imagined it. And a moment later they were past. Wheels still rolling, eyes ahead. Past the farmer. Who would live on, and keep what was his.

Around midday, they came to the snarl. Here the road curved around a steep rise.

The vehicles stopped.

At the front of the line of vehicles, Luke and the doc stepped out. Doc shaded his eyes in the sun. Luke looked pissed.

"I thought you said there was nothing to worry about," Luke called back to him, irritation in his voice.

"I didn't get this far," he shouted back.

A passel of cars sat abandoned. And beyond that, wreckage. Boulders dotted the road. Struck at high speed, probably at night.

The scene was NASCAR-esque. Pieces of twisted automobile spread unevenly over the several hundred feet of pavement. Steel shed like petals from a shook rose. The final nucleus rested upside down, like a dead turtle, burned black. Nobody had walked away from that.

Doc and Luke climbed back inside the RV and started the engine. They eased the big vehicle forward along the shoulder, sliding past the worst of the wreckage.

But beyond there, past the curve, the road got worse. The rockslide half covered the asphalt. The doc stuck his head out of the window and shouted orders. Nathan and Marco climbed out and walked ahead, guiding the caravan around the worst of the rock fall. They worked together to push the smaller stones out of the way so the RV could continue. Finally, they came to a place where the rocks grew bigger. Boulders proper. The right lane lay completely buried. On the left, a rock the size of a medicine ball blocked the way. The RV stopped. Nathan and Marco pushed on the boulder, but it wouldn't budge.

The doc stuck his head out the window again.

"Push harder," he said.

They pushed. And pushed. It was flat on the bottom; they couldn't get it to roll. "It won't go," Marco said.

"Keep trying."

So they pushed, but the stone didn't budge.

"Sonofabitch!" Doc hissed.

His head disappeared back inside the cab, and the RV crept forward again.

The huge vehicle slowly pulled forward until the bottom of the bumper touched the boulder, and then it kept coming, inching ahead, and the boulder screeched forward, grinding against the pavement. The stone moved. The fender bent. Then buckled. The boulder seemed to catch on something—some crack in the pavement, as it was scraping along, and it finally rolled, and the big RV came up over the top of it. With a squeal of rending metal, the RV lifted slightly, and something broke—a loud crack, and the RV came to rest, with the rock wedged firmly underneath.

The RV shifted into reverse, but the rock held strong, scraping the pavement, dragging along.

Doc climbed out, his face a red mask of fury.

He bent and looked underneath. "Sonofabitch," he hissed again. His voice was low, but somehow that was worse. He glared at the wedged truck for a moment then turned, looking for someone to blame.

Marco tried to calm him. "Maybe we can . . ."

The Doc hit him with a huge closed fist, and Marco's hat flew off. The doc hit him again, knocking him back against the truck, then again and again. Marco raised an arm to protect himself, but the doc was too big. Again, and again. Beat him down until he was on his back. And that is where most people would have stopped. Some circuit breaker in their heads tripping open. But the doc didn't have that circuit breaker. He kept swinging, pounding his fists down until Marco couldn't even raise an arm. And still he kept going. Stopping only when he was tired.

Doc wouldn't let them bury him.

"Just push him in the ditch."

So that's what they did.

Nathan put Marco's hat over his pulped face. With his hat over his face, it was almost like he could be sleeping. Hands folded across his stomach. Nathan felt he should say something—the only words the man would get.

"*I'm sorry*," he whispered.

For not helping.

For the TDR.

For leaving his dead body in the ditch.

For what happened in Perryton.

He was sorry for it all.

He climbed back up onto the road. He was tired. The kind of bone tired that seemed to come from the inside out. Tired of the travel, and the fear, and the moving sun.

The old man was looking back the way they'd come.

"We stop here for the night."

They made camp in the middle of the road, dragging brush onto the spidery pavement.

They built a fire, then broke out the last of their food stores.

The Doc pulled out a map and spread it out on the pavement where the glow of the fire cast a flickering light across it.

"There is no way forward," he declared. "But we can go back. We have to backtrack. It's going to cost time. And there's no food out here."

"The farmer," Luke said.

"Yeah." The Doc nodded, like he'd been thinking of it himself. "The farmer."

They finished the last of the corn in the dying light. Nathan only took a few spoonfuls.

The old man sat in his battered old lawn chair. Green and white plastic. Luke sat next to him, studying the map.

"It's a long-ass slog between reservations," Luke said.

Elias nodded.

"So you expect this farmer to just share?" Elias asked.

Across the firelight, the doc's eyes appraised him. "No, I don't expect he will. But I also don't expect we'll give him a choice."

"So we're thieves now?" It was Luke who said it. He spoke softly, then added, softer still, "It's about time."

"I ask you," Doc said. "Why is it right for this farmer to have so much, while we have so little?"

Nathan thought of the farmer's little girl. Her ribs showing through her skin.

"It *ain't* right," said Luke. "Ain't right at all. Greedy is what it is."

"Greedy," the doc said. He smiled with his shark teeth. "That's how I see it, too. And if it ain't greedy, well," and here he stood to stretch his legs. He gazed out over the dry basin that spread out before them. Miles and miles of land visible from their raised position on the road. "I don't give a damn. I'm *hungry*. And it's a long way to the reservation."

The doc had explained it once, months ago, when they'd first banded together.

"Not everybody catches it the same," he'd said while they all sat around the fire.

The reservations were the only places that had retained any kind of population density. The only place that pulled together to actually make things grow. That first year, when everything went crazy, they were the ones who planted. The ones who thought there might be a tomorrow after all.

"Why ain't you ever got it?" The question had come from Andrew, the boy who'd later be left behind, sixty, eighty miles back. Dead or not.

The fire had burned itself low. Luke was cleaning his gun, checking his ammunition.

"There were vaccines that were given out in the beginning," the doc said. "They gave doctors so many for children, or the elderly. Until the vaccines ran out, and no more came."

"What's that got to do with you never catching it?"

"Nothing."

"Then why didn't you ever catch it?"

"Lucky, I guess."

"And what about them? Why don't they catch it?" Andrew pointed at the map laid out on the doc's lap. The angular patches of green that gerrymandered their way across the Southwest. The dry lands. The reservations.

"Some do," the doc said. "It all comes down to immunity haplotypes. Everyone is born with a certain set. The right ones. Wrong ones. It all depends. Five hundred years ago, European diseases wiped out half a continent. Some HLA haplotypes went away. Others stayed."

"So they don't get it."

"Not like us," Doc said. "It's all immunity haplotypes and chance. For this bug, survival reaches its highest frequency in native Americans," and he smiled with his shark teeth, and Nathan knew he was more than just a dentist. "What goes around, comes around," he said. "It's our turn to die."

They woke. Luke emptied the RV of its supplies and loaded them into the four-by-four. They left the RV where it was, pinned to the rock. "Damn shame," Luke said under his breath as he climbed behind the wheel of the 4x4. The vehicles backed out, turned around. Headed back the way they'd come.

"You tell us where the turn off is," Luke said.

Nathan nodded.

He considered lying. The thought rose up in him. To play dumb. Forgetful. Lost. But he imagined the doc's face. Imagined his anger. They'd find the farmer no matter what.

"We getting close yet?" Impatience in the voice. Luke's eyes scanned the roadside, looking for tracks.

"Just up ahead."

Ten minutes later they were there.

The two trucks pulled off the road, following an old gravel track that led up into the bluffs.

At the top, the trucks stopped and the men climbed out.

"Where?"

"Just up ahead, a quarter mile. On the other side of the ridge."

Doc and Luke and Elias checked their guns. *Would they shoot the girl, too, or leave her to starve?*

They set out, taking the same trail he'd ridden his cycle along two days earlier. Five minutes later, they came to the drop off. The edge of the bluff. Nathan saw the farm. Same bullpen. Same sheep. Same house leaning toward a stand of corn. The bullpen spread out below. The farmer was bent to his work at the edge of the field, cutting open a slash of dirt with his hoe.

The doc walked down the hill, gun drawn.

Beyond the wire fence, the bull paced.

Three sheep. Two pigs.

A world of riches.

The farmer still hadn't noticed them. He had his back to them, bent over his work.

Doc stopped at the edge of the clearing. He held up his hand to stop the others. They watched the farmer.

"He's probably got a gun," Luke whispered.

"No, just a hoe," Nathan said.

"He had a hoe for you, because that's all he thought he needed. But in his house there'll be a gun. I guarantee it. If he heads for the house, you shoot him, do you hear?"

Luke nodded.

The doc turned to look at Nathan. "You got a problem with this, boy?"

"No. I got no problem."

They advanced slowly, the four of them, until they stood in the middle of the opening in front of the house.

"Farmer!" The doc called out.

The man stopped what he was doing. He lifted his head from his work and saw them for the first time. Saw the guns. His face went slack. At that moment, from inside the house, his daughter poked her head out through the front door, drawn by the strange voice. The farmer spotted her.

"No," Nathan whispered.

But the farmer turned, and he ran for the doorway.

"Stop!" the doc yelled.

The farmer kept running.

"I said *stop!*" Doc fired into the air.

The farmer sprinted faster.

Doc pointed the gun at the running man, closing one eye, taking aim. "Can't say I didn't warn him."

Nathan turned and raised his own gun—firing into the doc's chest. The puff of air blew the hair out of the doc's eyes. He had time to look surprised. The doc crumpled.

It happened quickly after that.

Nathan turned toward Luke as Luke's gun came up—and they both fired.

Crack, crack, crack.

Luke fell dead.

Nathan turned his gun toward the last man, Elias, who stood in shock, too slow to react. The man dropped his gun, a dark stain spreading in his pants. He backed away slowly.

"Don't shoot me. Don't shoot me, Nathan."

Nathan shot him. He fell dead.

When Nathan turned, the farmer stood in the doorway. A rifle jutted out from the shadows, aimed at him from across the small courtyard.

Nathan didn't trust himself to speak, so he didn't. And besides, the man might not have understood.

The man made a motion with the rifle. *"Déjelo! Déjelo!"*

Nathan didn't drop his gun. He reached up to wipe the hair from his eyes. Only then did he notice his hand was red, blood pouring down his sleeve.

Nathan turned and walked slowly over to where the doc lay dead. His mouth open, jagged teeth exposed to the sky.

Nathan turned his back to the farmer and walked up the hill to where they'd first crested the ridgeline. From the ridge he could see the whole basin spread out before him. A wide landscape that had once belonged to other people and might someday again.

He walked the ridge until his strength left him, and he could walk no more. He found a small pool of shadow in the dirt beneath a small tree. He sat, feeling the world begin to sway. He looked down at his red hand, dripping blood into a muddy red pool in the dust. The wind was hot, blowing across the basin, sighing through the scrubby pines. He found a nice red stone near his dusty boot, and laid his head against it. The rock was cool against his cheek, a soft pillow, smoothed by time, where he thought he might find his rest. ❍

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Carrie Vaughn <*www.carrievaughn.com*> is the author of the New York *Times* bestselling series of novels about a werewolf named Kitty, the most recent installment of which is *Kitty Rocks the House.* She also wrote the young adult novels *Voices of Dragons* and *Steel,* and the novels *Discord's Apple* and *After the Golden Age.* Carrie is a contributor to the Wild Cards series of shared world superhero books edited by George R.R. Martin, and her short stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. In 2011, she was nominated for a Hugo Award for best short story. An Air Force brat, she survived her nomadic childhood and managed to put down roots in Boulder, Colorado. In her latest story for us, an interstellar negotiater finds that the hardest skill to master may be . . .

THE ART OF HOMECOMING

Carrie Vaughn

This was not how I imagined my career ending. I'd hoped for a blaze of glory, a fiery punctuation mark, starships screaming through an atmosphere before crashing, hand-to-hand battles with the robot minions of an evil empire. At the very least. Not the most hideously uncomfortable meeting I'd ever been a part of.

We had already gone around in circles for twenty minutes. Describing the incident, trying to predict inherently unpredictable outcomes, avoiding veiled accusations. The Trade Guild liaison who'd been assigned to clean up the mess, an Agent Parma, desperately wanted a scapegoat, displaying a simmering need in her eyes that had me reaching for a blaster pistol that wasn't on my hip. The *Raja Ampat*'s captain, Song, was certain this would all blow over if we just ignored it. The trouble was, I didn't know which of them was right. Because of my direct actions, the Trade Guild had been barred from Cancri Four. How big a deal that was depended on who you asked. Somehow, Song had to convince Parma to just go away, but Parma wasn't going.

A pause came in the conversation, and for several long moments, none of us said a word. Captain Song watched me warily, no doubt waiting for me to lose it. Parma hung back from the conference table where Song and I had parked. All the cards were on the table. It only remained to see who was going to do anything with them.

There was, I decided, a simple way to cut through this mess. "Sir," I said, standing, smoothing out the fabric of my uniform jumpsuit. "I'd like to offer my resignation immediately—"

"Major Daring, you will not," he said, without even thinking.

But Parma's gaze lit up. The two of them engaged in a brief, silent contest of wills, and I realized they'd already discussed this possibility, just not in front of me. Parma had asked for my resignation, Song had already refused, and this was probably out of my hands one way or another.

After a moment of glaring at Song, Parma sighed. "Major Daring, that won't be necessary. You're far too valuable an asset and your experience will be appreciated moving forward."

Parma's vote of confidence was a political nicety. I was too valuable to let go but too much a liability to keep around. Did they think I was too naïve to understand what was really being said here? I dug my heels in for a fight. The mention of resigning—the forced opportunity to just *go away* and do something else, suddenly seemed golden. "Sir, my resignation offers the best compromise—"

"You will not resign," Song said. "Major, truly. This isn't worth throwing away your career over. The Guild won't require such an extreme gesture." Parma frowned but didn't argue, so maybe he was right.

There didn't seem to be much of my career left to throw away. If I didn't resign, I'd be demoted, taken off the Diplomatic Corps, and who knew what else. I'd rather leave entirely.

Parma edged closer. "If I might perhaps suggest early retirement rather than resignation as a more respectable alternative."

Semantics. We were arguing semantics.

I knew that look on Song's face, the gritted teeth and the glare to cut steel. He was wishing he was on the *Raja Ampat* so he could just throw this woman off. But we weren't, we were on the Cancri transit station, and neither Trade Guild nor Mil Div had jurisdiction here. And that was the problem: my screw-up—which still hadn't been officially defined as a screw-up, or this would have been a much simpler process—happened on a joint mission, and now no one knew what to do with me. Which was why walking away was looking better and better.

"Agent Parma, would you excuse us for a moment?" Song said finally.

"Of course." Parma bowed herself out of the room in a gesture of precise politeness, hands together and eyes lowered. She wasn't enjoying this, I realized. She just wanted it all to go away so she could do her job—making Trade Guild look good. Small comfort.

"Sit," Song said after she'd gone, and I did, reflexively following command. But he didn't say anything else.

So I said, "Retirement isn't a bad idea. Looks better in the records than resignation, doesn't it? We can just say I'd lost my edge and it was time."

"Don't tell me you really want to retire. You have another twenty years of service in you. Thirty years. You won't retire, you don't have it in you."

I raised an eyebrow, because he made it sound like a challenge. "The Guild will never be allowed back in the Cancri system, not in any of our lifetimes. Not after what I did."

"So what? It's a nothing system. And this was Trade Guild's fault—they didn't do the proper intel, and now they're trying to pin the blame on us. Don't sacrifice yourself for them."

That *us* gave me an unexpected warm feeling. He had my back. "Anybody can do my job," I muttered. I commanded a Mil Div diplomatic security unit. A very experienced, very good unit. But at best I was a glorified bodyguard. And I'd destroyed the mission, this go around.

Song leaned back, steepled his hands, glared some more. "What would you say if I told you that blowing the drones was the right call? The Di didn't want us there, they

were going to find a way to sabotage the meeting at some point, you were just the first one to see it and beat them to the punch."

"I'd say it's a little more complicated than that," I answered, deadpan.

"Good thing I'm making the report to the Guild and not you, then. Forget about Parma. I'll handle her. Here's what I want you to do: take a leave of absence. Just a month or two. Let this blow over, let the next scandal distract everyone, and you can get your head on straight and come back and do your job, no demotions. Where's home for you?"

I hated when people asked that. "I don't really have one."

"Family? You must have family somewhere."

I did. Zelda. Mim, Tom, on Ariana. I'd already thought of them, in that moment when retirement sounded like the best plan in the universe. But Ariana was their home, not mine. Could I make it mine?

"Go visit them. Sit still and do nothing for a month and see how you feel about retirement then."

"Sir, Captain Song, I appreciate that, but I really think it would be better for everyone—for the ship, for the Guild, if I left—"

"You're not thinking straight. Get out of here and clear your head so you can listen to yourself. Maybe you're right, maybe you're ready to retire. But try it first before you give up on the *Raja Ampat* and Mil Div."

This was the real compromise Song had already worked out for himself—get me away for a little while so he could clean up, then welcome me back, no harm done. What the captain didn't understand was how serious I was about the retirement. I already had a standing offer for another life. Maybe it was time to give it a try.

Nobody in the arrival lounge was wearing a uniform, which I'd expected, so it shouldn't have bothered me. But I was wearing mine, dark blue with pale-green piping, silver rank tabs glaring obvious on the collar. After the last three years on the *Raja Ampat* surrounded by uniforms, being planetside among civilians felt weird. I should have changed clothes—if I'd had anything more appropriate to change into. Gym shorts, maybe. People were looking at me, but not with anything more than casual interest. Not many Mil Div officers came through here, that was all. They were interested, not accusing. I was the one who was uncomfortable. Zelda would loan me some more casual clothes until I could get some outfits of my own.

Officially, this was a holiday, but I couldn't stop worrying. About my clothes, about seeing Zelda after almost a decade apart. About whether I'd even be going back to the *Raja Ampat*, or staying. Captain Song, Agent Parma, no one else was going to make the decision. No one wanted to be the one to boot out the decorated Major Daring. So it was up to me to decide, and I was too tired to think straight.

Reaching immigration and customs, seeing the agents in their gray jumpsuits, badges on their shoulders, was something of a relief. Fellow officers, people who understood the stiffness in my posture and seriousness in my gaze. But no, the guy still gave me that curious, mildly awestruck *look* that the civilians were giving me. I offered my wrist and its implant for the agent to scan. His answering smile was broad and welcoming, like something out of a tourism advert.

"Here on holiday, Major Daring?" Was it worse that the smile seemed genuine, and not a put on?

"Maybe, unless I decide to stay." My accent was foreign here, too flat and atonal next to his lilting, rolling voice.

"Wouldn't that be something?" he said, clicking his scanner until a light went green. "Have a marvelous time, Major."

The rank didn't feel right anymore and made me twitch. "Wendy. Just Wendy, here," I murmured.

People mostly came to Ariana on holiday, but the planet attracted a larger than usual number of immigrants. The habitable continents remained intentionally pastoral; the whole economy was based on agriculture, agricultural support, and tourism. People who came here to live were expected to work hard, but for the right people, the reward was paradise. Zelda, Mim, and Tom had come here eight standard years ago, took every crash course in artisanal farming they could, homesteaded, and became Arianan. Even their accents had shifted, as I'd noted in their vid messages over the years. My own sister sounded foreign, now. Like I'd told the captain—I didn't really have a home.

I finally escaped immigration and went through sliding doors to an outdoor courtyard.

Here was sunshine filtered through an oxygenated planetary atmosphere, which didn't feel like any other kind of light in the universe. I stopped, put my hand up to shade my eyes. How long had it been since I'd stood under open sky? Was the sudden bout of vertigo real, or did I only think I ought to be feeling this dizzy? I smelled unfiltered air, scented with trees and flowers and something roasting on a food cart somewhere. The courtyard opened to a street with pedicabs and a moving sidewalk, and kiosks offered guided tours of the capital city, Sage. I'd need more than a month to take all this in, surely.

And there was Zelda, waving and yelling. "Wendy! Wendy Wendy Wendy!"

My sister looked like some kind of elf from a story, in a loose white shirt and knee-length pants, red hair pulled back from her face and falling loose past her shoulders, face dappled with freckles, arms taut with muscles. And that smile.

Behind her, sitting in an open-canopied gray ground car, were Mim and Tom, twin brother and sister. Mim had short dark hair, mahogany skin, a bright blue dress, and a necklace of beads; as pastoral and otherworldly as Zelda. Sitting at the steering column, Tom wore a tunic and pants, and his eyes crinkled when he smiled. Wry and welcoming, he hadn't changed at all since the last time I'd seen him. I didn't know why I'd been worried.

Zelda ran up and caught me in a tackling, rib-crushing hug. I was almost too stunned to respond.

"I missed you so much!" Zelda exclaimed, laughing.

That wave of dizziness again, overwhelming. To finally be here with Zelda, to see them all again in the flesh, no video delay, no recording. Zelda hadn't changed, everything had changed.

"Careful," I said, pulling away to regain my balance. "I'm a bit wobbly. Still feels like I'm on the rocket." Zelda nodded as if she understood and hugged me again, gently.

When Song said take time off, I supposed I could have gone to any one of a thousand planets with sun-drenched beaches, powder-covered mountains, gorgeous vistas, or luxurious resorts. I'd been given a generous allowance and an enviable stretch of time with which to decide my future. But I came here, and this was why.

Zelda and Mim married young, twenty-three and twenty-four standard, far too young most of us thought, even more so when they came up with their outrageous plan to move to Ariana and raise goats. The plan didn't surprise me—it was Zelda all over, romantic and impossible, full of dreams, lacking details. I was more worried for Mim and what would happen to the relationship when they got halfway there and Zelda lost interest. But she didn't lose interest. Moreover, they'd invited Tom to come with them, and he did. They worked out a business plan, entered the lottery for a land grant, won, and the future opened up for all three of them.

They invited me to come with them, too. Well, Tom did, really. But I'd just landed my position in the Diplomatic Security Corps and my career had too much momentum to turn away from it for anything. Especially goat farming. Hard, right at the moment, to remember what that had felt like, willing to give up everything for the corps. The galaxy had seemed very big, then. Right now, I thought I might be just competent enough to handle a goat farm and not much else.

Over the last eight years I'd been present during first contact protocols for six different alien civilizations, become certified to provide security during summits with twelve more, and had briefed countless system governing bodies on security concerns and xeno relations. I had the kind of life people wrote stories about.

But Zelda did, too. In a technology-drenched galaxy, she had brought to life an ancient time. Their farm targeted the luxury foods market with goat cheese and homegrown herbs, which they exported off planet, entered in competitions and won awards, and sold to wholesalers years in advance. One time, I saw cheese from Daring-Patel Farms in a pricey food boutique on a transit station twenty light years away from Ariana. I couldn't afford it. But I'd get to try the cheese now.

Originally, I'd planned on hiring an aircab to take me out to the farm. Zelda wouldn't hear of it. She insisted they'd be in town picking up some things anyway, and that the best way to see Ariana's countryside was by ground, so they absolutely had to come to the spaceport to pick me up.

I had to admit now that taking the ground car was a brilliant idea.

Transit usually wasn't so physical for me. In space, in warp, I entered the metal shell of my ship, the quantum processes of interstellar travel worked their magic, and I hardly even felt it except as a twinge, a moment of dizziness, like going into a room and not remembering why I wanted to be there. I left my cabin, and the ship was in a different part of the galaxy. Transit meant nothing.

Here, I couldn't deny the movement. Rubber-padded wheels on a packed dirt road, an open canopy, landscape passing by—and wind, the very air moving around me, playing with my short-cropped hair, making my scalp itch. It should have felt like standing in a compartment that had just opened to vacuum, but it didn't. This was . . . organic, for lack of a better word. I could have closed my eyes and still known that I was under open sky and not in a wind tunnel.

Once we left the capital, I smelled the endless rolling fields passing by, hot living grasses, a musty organic scent that somehow managed to smell green. I could taste the vegetation on the back of my tongue, as if I were chewing one of those blades of grass between my teeth. My stomach rumbled, full of appetite. The tires' humming vibrations massaged my muscles, rattling loose the last months—years—of stress.

I'd fought in battles to protect worlds like this. Made the battles seem worthwhile, though they didn't often seem so while I was in the middle of them. I liked it better when all the sides stayed at the negotiating table, or pillar, or cloud drift, or wherever, and all I had to do was stand there looking official. Captain Song pulled this vacation on me because he thought I'd get bored. That was going to backfire. I could retire to this. I could stay here forever, under the sun.

The agoraphobia—the blank shock at having so much open sky around me, miles and miles to the nearest wall—came and went. I did okay as long as I was gripping the door handle. I never once told Tom he was driving too fast. He would have made a joke about the speed of spaceflight and laughed at me.

Zelda planned a picnic on a hill, part of a vast public parkland near the farm, a rolling meadow of grasses kept short by wandering sheep. The sheep weren't here at the moment, and we spread a blanket in the shade of a tree overlooking a field of

green. So much green. We had a view of a whole valley: the grid of farmland stretching out, with furrowed acres and rows of olive trees and vineyards. This part of Ariana might have been built to order, its beauty was so heart-stopping. Probably had been designed, just so.

Then came the food. All of it fresh from the farm's kitchen. Tom carried the wicker basket from the car, Mim arranged wooden plates and cloth napkins, sliced cheese and broke bread, filled little bowls with plump red grapes and blackberries she'd picked that morning. It was crazy, unbelievably decadent to my eyes. It must have cost a fortune, except they'd grown most of it themselves, so no. I'd be eating up a day or two of profit, that was all.

I picked up a slice of firm, yellowish cheese, and a beeping rang, accompanied by a vocal warning in my audio bug. I'd turned off all the official channels when I left the *Raja Ampat,* but this was a medical alert, which I couldn't shut down: *These consumables have not passed Mil Div testing standards. Non pasteurized, non sterilized—*

"What's that?" Zelda said. The beeping had been loud enough for everyone to hear.

I gave a subvocal command to my transponder implant—also a rudimentary scanner, meant to ensure that I didn't eat something incompatible or outright poisonous to my system while I was on an alien world. So really, the device was doing exactly what it was supposed to be doing, and I was pretty sure such rich food would play havoc with my digestive system for the next few days. I'd brought medication to avert the worst of it. Zelda and the others didn't have to know the details.

A bit chagrined, I said, "My transponder. I can't shut off all the functions. I'm sorry, it shouldn't bother us again."

"They're not calling you back to work, are they?"

I was hoping to avoid talking too much about work while I was here. I *wouldn't* be called back, not unless the Cancri mess cleared up a whole lot faster than I expected it to. Another possibility: Mil Div might call me back if they were very, very desperate. Naturally, the scenarios spun out in my mind, because I was often thinking about such scenarios. It was habit, or pathological maybe. I could think of at least three xenopolitical situations that would render my recent disaster moot and require me returning to the ship immediately, and all of them involved some kind of invasion or multi-system armed conflict. Even Ariana would be affected. I wished I was sure something like that couldn't possibly happen.

I had to pull myself back to the current idyll.

"No, no, I've got a whole month, they won't call me unless there's a disaster, and that kind of disaster would mean we had bigger problems." Again, they didn't need to know the details.

Zelda's smile returned full force. Carefree and happy, and I hoped she'd stay that way the whole visit. Mim distributed food, and Tom gave me a look, like he suspected what was going on under the surface.

"Wendy, eat, eat!" Zelda insisted, and I finally tried the bite I'd been holding.

The food was so fresh it lit up my tongue. Mil Div nutritionists insisted nobody could tell the difference between fresh or vat-grown and preserved, dirt-grown or hydroponics. I could tell. There was wine. I hadn't had a drink in weeks—alcohol and warp travel made my stomach do things that didn't make the pleasure worthwhile. This went straight to my head and felt divine.

"Tell us stories, Wendy," Zelda said. They'd started a second bottle of wine and were sprawled out on the blanket, watching shapes in the clouds, and shadowed surfaces of the two moons hanging near the horizon.

"I don't know any stories."

"Where you were last, then? What was the last planet you went to and what hap-

pened? What did you do? I know you always say it's boring, but I want to hear about it anyway. It's only boring to you."

The last mission? Oh, what the hell. They wouldn't have actually heard of the place and I could gloss over the worst of it. "All right, then. My last stop: 55 Cancri. The fourth planet."

Tom stared. "Cancri Four? Where that riot happened? Where the Trade Guild was booted out? You were there for that?"

So they had heard of it. Oops. "Yeah, I was there."

"Oh my gosh, you weren't actually *there,* were you? On the planet, I mean?" Mim said, eyes round, horrified.

"No. I was in orbit." And that wasn't a lie, as far as it went. My *drone* had been on the planet, and I'd been interfaced with my drone, which was almost just like being there. The whole team had gone down in drones, because the planet was a gas giant. It was the only way we could meet with the Di hydrogen breathers. But my team hadn't quite been able to explain to the Di that the drones were machines, not suits, and when the Di started wrenching open the metal shells looking for weapons, I'd ended up pulling the pin on the drones' destruct sequences. Destroyed the Trade Guild contingent and did quite a bit of damage to the Di in the process. The Di cried foul and refused to send another delegation. Riot was a strong word for the ensuing chaos as the Di forced all Trade Guild personnel off the planet and out of orbit.

The incident was still under review when I'd left. Truth be told, I agreed with Captain Song: my destroying the drones had been the right call, based on my suspicion that what the Di really wanted was to confiscate the technology, not negotiate. From an economic and political standpoint, it should have been a minor incident. The Trade Guild had mining rights at plenty of gas giants and Cancri four wasn't an essential trading partner. But the event had been enough of a disaster that it had made news. Not the kind of news that was actually news, like the stellar-political balance of power shifting, war and famine and failures of technology and the rest that would actually make a difference, but the kind of freak-show news that drew crowds of gawkers because people couldn't look away. My name had never come into it, except as "the unnamed Military Division officer who allegedly instigated the riot." Which wasn't accurate or reassuring.

"Really, it was embarrassing more than anything. You'd be surprised how often stuff like this happens." I winced; now they'd be even more worried.

"I don't want to know," Mim said, holding her hand flat in a "stop" gesture, her eyes shut. "I don't want to think about anyone blowing you up."

"I told you, I wasn't even there. My *drone* got blown up. We use drones where we can't handle the atmosphere or gravity. It's safer." Or in case the host species decided to attack us, for example . . .

"The worst thing you'll face around here is goats shitting on you," Tom said.

"I think I would rather have my drone blown up by aliens," I said, and they laughed like they were supposed to, and ate more food, and talked about the weather.

We'd started packing up when Zelda, Mim, and Tom exchanged looks in a silent conversation. They wanted to say something, but was it good or bad? Curious, patient. I waited.

"We have news," Zelda said finally, and her whole face lit up. I was ashamed that my heart sank a little. This was the look my sister had had when she announced that she and Mim were getting married. It was her Big Plan Look, that meant she was going to turn her world upside down chasing a dream. What exactly was so enticing that she'd give up all this?

"Can you guess?" Zelda said. "You have to guess."

"Look at that, Zel, she's scared to death. Drop the suspense and tell her," Mim chided.

"You tell her, I can't even get the words out."

"She's *your* sister!"

Zelda bit her lip, as if to keep her smile from getting any bigger. "Okay okay okay. Well. The news is—we've got a baby started."

The three of them looked at me expectantly, and I didn't know what to say.

I didn't know how I *felt*. First, relieved, that Zelda seemed well and truly settled, happy and confident enough to take on something like a baby. Second—how had my little sister grown up enough to have a *baby?*

"Wow," was all I could say.

Zelda babbled. "She's a little girl, three months along. We must have spent months talking about how to do it, whose DNA and how and if we wanted to go natural, but then which one of us would carry her, but then we decided neither of us could take the time off from the farm and this is safer anyway, and then this was Mim's idea, since she and Tom are so much alike anyway, we just had them pop his sperm and my egg in a test tube, no extra expense for genetic manipulation, apart from basic screening and so on, and there we go, baby! Anyway she's incubating at the pre-natal center in Sage, and I can't wait until we can bring her home."

I covered my mouth with my hand to hide the disbelieving smile, and my eyes were stinging. I had to say something before I started leaking.

"And that's why we're so glad you could come visit," Zelda went on. "I mean it would have been better in a few months after she's born and you could meet her, but you can come back, and this way I could tell you in person. I really wanted to tell you in person."

"Oh, Zelda, I'm so happy for you all," I said finally, opening my arms to take my sister in for another fierce hug. A minute later Tom and Mim joined us. One big group hug, one big happy family, and I wondered at my luck to ever be a part of it. I was going to be an aunt. At least, if I stayed I would be. Or I could go back to Mil Div and be the distant, mysterious aunt who had adventures and was never around.

Zelda and I had grown up in a city, on a planet that was all city, even the polar ice caps, which housed cold-weather research and manufacturing. We'd been born into a collective, with eleven adults operating in an accounting firm and six children growing up together. Our four collective-siblings continued on in the business, but we'd always been different. None of us had paid much attention to which adults were whose parents—it wasn't supposed to matter, when you operated a family like a business—but I understood that we shared a biological mother, Eva, and that she'd been different, too. She took the auditing cases, traveled, and was sought after by corporations looking to track down embezzlement and other internal problems. Eva was an accounting hit man, and she loved adventure. That was the word in the family, that Eva loved adventure, and she'd passed that trait to her daughters. We had her red hair, too.

So while the other siblings certified as accountants, Zelda went to a college where she could try everything, from art to science to solar sail racing, looking for inspiration. She'd found Mim. By then, I'd graduated from the planet's Mil Div academy. I hadn't known what I wanted any more than Zelda had, only that I wanted to go *away*. Away from the planet that was a city, away to something completely different, to some wide open spaces, and you couldn't get more wide open than space. Same impulse as Zelda, opposite direction. Once at the academy, I discovered an aptitude for security. From there, the Diplomatic Corps beckoned because of the prestige. They were the best, they saw the real action. Almost a thousand space-faring species populated the galaxy, and I wanted to meet them all. I wanted to keep moving. In the years since then, I'd never been bored.

People sometimes said there was nothing new in the universe, but there was. Mil Div was finding new civilizations all the time. Trillions of sentient beings in the universe, and the thing that made them all alike was that they made choices. Each choice that each life made was new to that life.

Nobody could say that Zelda and I had picked wrong. We'd each picked our direction and kept running full tilt. Something to be admired in that.

I still wasn't bored with the job, with Mil Div or the Diplomatic Corps. I still had a good nine hundred species to encounter. So I hadn't come to Ariana because I'd gotten bored. I'd come because I was tired. For the first time, I'd come to a fork and not known which way to go.

I fell asleep on the last few miles of driving to the farm, and even though I protested that I was fine, Zelda diagnosed rocket lag and put me to bed. My own bed, in a wide room that would have fit four cabins on the *Raja Ampat,* with wood-paneled walls and gauze curtains. A room with a window. It was novel.

Zelda hung a blanket over the window to cut out the sunlight, and I slept for twelve standard hours.

After waking up, I wandered into the kitchen wrapped in a soft cotton robe Zelda had left for me. I ran my hands along the wood-paneled walls. Real wood, which seemed extravagant to eyes used to sleek metal and plastiform. The texture of it intrigued me, and Mim found me in the living room, hands pressed to the walls, caressing them.

"You okay?" she asked, and I blinked back to wakefulness. I was fine.

Mim stuffed food and coffee into me—fresh coffee, grown on another continent on Ariana, was a revelation. My medical alert had reset itself overnight and went off again, ranting about excessive addictive compounds and potential for systemic overload. That was the point, I muttered at it. I got dressed, wandered outside, and Tom and Zelda taught me how to milk goats. It was the most visceral, organic thing I'd ever done in my life, except for eating and sex.

The goats reminded me of at least a couple of species I'd dealt with. Their eyes with the warped pupils, their flopping accidental ears. Their tempers, expressed in the way they bounced on sharp hooves and bleated indignantly. Hell, I'd met ambassadors who sounded like that.

My visit didn't stop the others from working—work never let up on a farm, with goats and chickens to feed and garden plots to weed and the rest. I was happy enough to sit, watch, and not think about much of anything in particular.

I slept another ten hours, amazed that I hadn't noticed how tired I was. Ten missions on thirteen worlds in the last year alone—I should have noticed. No wonder Song wanted me to take time off.

I thought about calling Captain Song, or better yet the XO, Achebe, to find out if an initial report on the Cancri Four incident had been issued yet, and what it said about me. Had my abrupt disappearance started any rumors? I wasn't sure I cared, but it would be nice to know.

I finally had a chance to unpack and distribute the gifts I'd brought: a silk tunic-style shirt for Zelda, who tried it on immediately, then spun and admired the way the light played off the blue and yellow abstract pattern; a string of hand-made glass beads for Mim; and a bottle of scotch for Tom. Gifts quickly chosen from an import boutique at the Cancri transit station when I realized I'd be coming to visit. They seemed appreciative.

Then came another meal: potatoes, chicken, asparagus, more herbs, goat butter, and candied peaches for dessert. The rich fresh food did, in fact, upset my digestion,

and the medical alert went off again, and I shut it down, again. The parameters were set too conservatively, which on a mission was fine, but on vacation? You were supposed to overindulge on vacation. I could imagine the *Raja Ampat*'s physician downloading the record and raising an eyebrow at me. Assuming I ever went back. Never mind. A couple of pills took care of the problem. In that, at least, I'd come prepared. Alien world, indeed.

Over dinner, we talked about the baby. They were arguing names. Wendy was on the list, but I shot down the idea as too confusing. Eva, I liked.

After dinner, Zelda and Mim went out to check the barns, lock up the goats for the night, and turn on the perimeter fence. The original terraformers had imported coyotes to serve as the ecosystem's apex predators and as pest control for the inevitable rodent infestations, and they'd become a problem for farmers with livestock. The fence had motion-activated laser deterrents that singed without killing. Zelda didn't want to kill the predators. The canines had mostly learned to stay away.

I helped Tom clean up the kitchen. He was of average height, with broad shoulders, his brown skin burnished by sun and wind. A farmer's life seemed to suit him. Back in the day, when Zelda and Mim had first hooked up, we'd had a fling. Recreational and satisfying. Could have grown into more, maybe. I could have come with them to Ariana, but I'd picked Mil Div. One of those long-gone forks in the road.

He kept throwing sidelong glances at me, a wry smile on his lips. Finally I said, "Why don't you pour me a glass of wine and we can talk." So he did, and we sat across the kitchen table from one another.

He took a sip. "Zelda keeps thinking you'll be ready to retire soon and finally come stay with us. We could use the help."

I flushed, because as far as they were concerned, I was on vacation. I hadn't told them about the review, about my attempt to resign, or anything. How much did Tom guess? "I've thought about it," I said, quietly, cryptically.

"You didn't tell everything about what happened on Cancri Four, did you? What else happened?" His eyes widened. "They're not kicking you out, are they?"

"No, not yet," I said. "But I offered to take early retirement."

Was that a flash of hope in his gaze, and did my heart sink a little, seeing it?

"My offer was not initially accepted," I added. "I'm supposed to be here thinking it over."

"I'm glad you came," he said, heartfelt. It wasn't just Zelda who wanted me to stay.

My eyes stung, yet again. I was never usually this weepy. "I have a confession," I said, studying the ruby liquid in my glass. "I'm amazed you guys have made it this long. I'm amazed *you've* stuck it out this long. I love those two dearly but they drive me crazy sometimes."

Tom said, "I like it here. I want a family. This is a good family. Zelda and Mim are the right kind of crazy." He ducked, smiled. The love in the room was thick, apparent. "With the sprout on the way . . .we've decided on three. But I think we can talk the natal council into a couple more. We've got the space and savings for it."

"Five kids. You want five kids?"

"I want a *big* family. Can't get that on a starship." He held out the vision like bait.

Five little Zeldas running around . . . No, five Zeldas, Mims and Toms. With a herd of goats and fifty acres of farm, with blackberry brambles and apple trees. Like something out of a story. A myth.

"I'm in awe." My stare had become a bit glazed, thinking of five little Zeldas. I couldn't imagine it. It had never occurred to me to imagine it. It still didn't.

"You shouldn't be. This is what everyone used to do. But what you do . . ." He shook his head in vague explanation, as if he didn't even know what I did. Maybe he didn't. He continued, "If you decide you want a family, this is the place for it. But I guess you

kind of have a family already, with Mil Div and your ship and all." He glanced away, blushing in apology.

That gave me an unexpected pang, because as soon as he said it I thought of Captain Song, and Achebe, and my squad and even Sergeant Barrett who ran the mess hall. I could picture them all, perfectly. "I guess so," I said. "I don't have any regrets, Tom, if that's what you're asking."

"No, it's not what I'm asking. I just thought you might be ready for a change."

I couldn't have had this talk with Zelda, who wouldn't understand why I loved to travel at all, and would have become flustered trying. Nearly every message she sent me, she asked when I was coming home. But I'd always believed what I told Captain Song: I didn't have a home.

We finished our wine just as Zelda and Mim came in. I told Tom, "I'll think about it. I'm here to think about it."

Zelda stared. "You talked? Tom, did you talk to her? Wendy, what did you decide?"

"I decided to think about it," I said.

Zelda looked at the ceiling and groaned in frustration. "We'll just have to keep stuffing with you wine until you agree to stay."

Sounded like a good plan to me.

I got a bad sunburn my second week on Ariana. After the first week of napping and eating and more sleeping, I'd woken up and felt the need to do something, so Zelda took me to the coast and we'd gone for a hike on a trail overlooking ocean. Ocean was something I didn't see very often, and I must have spent an hour just staring out.

Zelda was very apologetic—they had sunblock lotion, but they all spent so much time outside they'd gotten tan enough that it didn't matter. They wore wide-brimmed hats to keep the sun off, and she hadn't thought to get a hat for me.

I assured her that I didn't mind. "It's just so nice feeling the warmth off a G-type main sequence star, it's worth a little burn." Really, the redness felt like carrying the sun inside with me, which made me smile.

Zelda had stared at me for a minute. Like I'd been speaking a different language, there. "Weird," She said finally, shaking her head.

Yeah.

They babied me with aloe for my face, the big fluffy bed and clean, sun-dried bedding, and lots and lots of food. I was gaining weight by the day, enough to throw off fuel calculations for a drop shuttle. I wasn't sure I deserved all the attention from Zelda and the others, however much they kept going on about their interstellar heroic sister and begging me for stories. They weren't really celebrating the Mil Div hero, of which there were hundreds; they were celebrating me because I was family. I was *their* Mil Div hero.

After that first week, I sent a short message to Achebe asking for news and the mood of the ship. Just out of curiosity.

We played card games by the fireplace in the evenings, Zelda and the others teaching me the ones they'd learned on Ariana, me teaching the ones I'd learned on my travels. Tom lit a fire, not because it was cold but because I was amazed that they actually burned organic materials with open flame. Oxygen-devouring open flame. They had air to burn, on a planet like this. Once I remembered to breathe, I could appreciate the fire's smoky warmth, the friendly crackling of the burning wood.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mim asked. I must have been acting like a freak.

I always said yes.

* * *

I tried to imagine myself as part of the routine here. Milking goats, treading in gravity. Babysitting. Something attractive about that kind of life. It was something we talked about on the ship sometimes. Most Mil Div folk had this assumption that if we managed to survive, we would retire one day to plots of land on bucolic worlds like Ariana, with spouses and babies and green growing things. I'd send them pictures of the coast and cliffs, breaking waves, blossoms in the trees, and they'd sigh with envy. And then they'd all sign up for another tour.

A couple of times a week, supper was a production because Tom came back from the market in Sage with treasures, fresh foodstuffs they didn't grow themselves. sausages and vegetables that were specialties on other farms. Tom sold their own specialties that didn't go to the wholesalers. Lots of bartering, which seemed to me to be just as exotic as the wood paneling and sunburns.

He and Mim cooked, Zelda cleaned house, and they wouldn't let me help, and I wondered if I'd ever be allowed to help. Or would I be their showpiece, their exotic space-faring sometime-sister. They'd throw parties and I'd tell stories about blasting my team's drones on Cancri, for entertainment.

Mim let me pour wine. We gathered around the table, and Tom brought out a wide platter and gave us each a serving.

My plate landed in front of me, and I choked, gagging on a sensation of horror. The center of the meal was a wide, round shining slab that might have been dense vegetable, marinated and roasted, or some kind of spineless fish. Its color was a deep, rich purple, almost black and pale, and it had been sliced lengthwise, skin side facing out, and garnished with greens, and some kind of cheese was dribbled and melted over it. I'd never seen any food like it. It was alien. Familiarly alien.

I couldn't possibly disguise my expression of open-mouthed shock. The others ceased their noises of delight at the feast and stared at me staring at my plate.

How could I explain? "I'm sorry, but . . . it looks like someone I know."

Zelda put her hand over her mouth to hide a smile.

"Wendy," Tom said. "It's eggplant. It's just eggplant."

And I knew that, of course I knew that, I'd been warned in all the briefings before the Heeban mission, that the Heeban delegates were gas-giant dwellers and had air bladders that allowed them to float at altitude, but also made them look like eggplants. Some of the negotiators had still expressed shock upon meeting the Heebans. It had been abstract to me, who had never seen an eggplant, and so wasn't bothered at all. And now, finally confronted with an eggplant, I discovered that the Heebans didn't look like eggplants; rather, eggplants looked like the Heebans. It was an intriguing cognitive difference that I'd have to talk to the linguistics and psych people about later.

"I know, and I'm sorry, I know how hard you worked making this. It's just food." Determined, I hefted my knife and fork, swallowed hard against a gag reflex, and tried to cut.

"These consumables have not passed Mil Div testing standards. Non pasteurized, non sterilized—"

I put down my utensils and rested my head on my hands. I just couldn't do it.

Zelda rolled her eyes. "Oh Wendy, you're so *weird*."

It was something Zelda always said, ever since we were little, but the words had a different flavor this time. They'd never cut, before. I'd never felt like I'd done something *wrong* before.

"I'm not trying to be." I should have kept quiet and eaten the damn thing.

No, I shouldn't have. I had a right to say no to what turned my stomach. Not to eat something that looked like a friend.

I said, "They're called the Heeban, and I was part of a team negotiating with them

for hydrogen mining rights. They're about this big"—I showed a space with my hands the size of my head—"and they're made mostly of air bladders that let them swim in the dense atmosphere. And they're mostly really nice—"

It was even the right size for a Heeban, just bigger than my spread hand. The . . . eggplant, whatever . . . had the right sheen to its skin, and the same boneless, dense appearance as the gas giant-dwelling species I'd spent most of a year with, some four years ago now. The Heeban had a great appreciation for calm. I'd liked them, especially my security counterpart, who'd been about my relative age and had been amused by the proceedings. We'd traded jokes about our respective charges—one-liners about airbags and drifting conversations—that had actually translated, which didn't happen very often in the greater galaxy. I hadn't talked to ¡Fíver in almost a year. I owed my friend a message.

The others were staring again. Mim was already five bites into her meal, and she looked guiltily at the greenish flesh stabbed on her fork.

"I'm sorry," I said and pushed away from the table. "You all finish, I'll just take a walk."

I went up the grassy hill behind the farm to watch the sunset. A slow, planetary sunset, not the blazing flash of light I'd see in orbit. The heat of it stung my still toasted cheeks. Which sunset did I like better? I couldn't decide. The sky went on forever here, and I couldn't control it, and I realized, only two weeks on now, I missed the *Raja Ampat*. Captain Song had been right.

Zelda found me maybe half an hour later. Long enough to scarf down eggplant without me looking at them like they were murderers. She brought a blanket with her, and a thermos of hot cocoa with two cups. We sprawled out on the blanket, watched the last of the sunset, the moons glowing with its reflected light, and the first of the stars coming out. There were a lot of them. Ariana's star was coreward, so the sky was crowded, thick bands of stars, blues and whites and red, roiling in tangles. I looked up and saw a thousand civilizations, each vying for their little stake in the world. And I had to go back to the middle of it.

Zelda and the farm were on the outside, watching contentedly. They'd still be here, years or decades from now. I could look into any sky and think of them.

"You're not going to stay, are you?" Zelda said, after a long stretch of quiet.

"No."

"Is it because of the eggplant? Was it that totally offensive?"

"No," I said, chuckling. Everyone on the ship was going to laugh hysterically at the eggplant story.

"Are you happy?"

I turned to look at Zelda and said, unambiguously, so that my sister would not mistake the meaning for some otherworldly euphemism, "Yes."

"I don't understand you."

Likewise, I might have said, but didn't because it didn't matter. I playfully shoved my sister's shoulder and said, "And I will never, ever understand what you see in goats. They *stink.*"

Zelda shrugged. "You have to put up with some shit to get the really great cheese."

I laughed because it was the most absurd and true thing I'd ever heard in my life.

"You'll come visit again, yeah?" Zelda said, in a small voice that made her sound like she was twelve once more, and we were back home in the city and wondering how we were going to get out of there.

We'd done it. We'd really done it, and when it came time for me to take a break, I didn't go back to the city and the collective that had raised me. I came here.

"Of course I will," I said. "This is home." ❍

Ian Watson now lives in the north of Spain. His most recent novel (in collaboration with Andy West) is *The Waters of Destiny,* launched at the end of 2012 as three ebooks entitled *Assassins, Tongue of Knowledge,* and *Death Overflows* <www.watersofdestiny.com>. Ian won the British SF Association Award for short fiction in 2010 for "The Beloved Time of Their Lives" from *The Beloved of My Beloved* co-written with Italian surrealist Roberto Quaglia (NewCon Press, UK). Last year, Ian's eleventh story collection appeared (also from NewCon Press). *Saving for a Sunny Day,* the title story, was in *Asimov's* October/November 2006 issue. The author's latest tale takes an intriguing look at an alternate twentieth century timeline that leads to its own version of . . .

BLAIR'S WAR

Ian Watson

During that autumn of 1937, even when the thirty-six refugee girls from the Basque Country were making better progress in English, they all still crowded around the big radio of polished rosewood in the lounge each evening to have Akorda Zubiondo explain to the best of her ability what the BBC announcer was saying in his plummy accent. What riveted their attention was news about the stirring victories and occasional setbacks of the British Expeditionary Force in Spain under General Blair.

Akorda was one of the señoritas who had volunteered to accompany almost four thousand children on the elderly, very overcrowded cruise liner *Habana* on their journey from Bilbao to Southampton, a month after the Germans carpet-bombed to a blackened husk on market day most of the town of Guernica. Venerated by the Basques, Guernica was where they had sited their fledgling parliament. Akorda graduated as a teacher of English a week before all schools in the Basque Country closed as a safety measure.

The girls' hosts here at Kellstone Abbey, Lord and Lady Hensley, often joined Akorda and the girls for the evening news. The Hensleys were Socialists, hence the offer of their home as a "colony" until the rebel generals and Franco's Fascist and Nazi allies could be thoroughly thrashed. Thanks to connections, Richard Hensley was more in the know than most people, and he'd been amazed how politically aware the majority of the children were, even those as young as nine, when they first arrived on his doorstep. These "victims of a conflict they could scarcely comprehend," to quote one newspaper a year since, were very well versed in who Mussolini and Hitler were, and the French Prime Minister Léon Blum, and Churchill and Eden and the War Minister Duff Cooper. There'd been endless political debate back home in the Basque towns before and even while the bombs rained.

The other day, thirteen-year-old Josefina received a letter from her cousin of the

same age, Esteban, who'd been sent to a colony at a sanatorium, disused until then, in a wilderness called Northumberland where bedtimes came early and baths were an obsession. Josefina had written to her cousin happily about Kellstone Abbey, to the extent that happiness was possible, and Esteban was now thinking of running away from his sanatorium, but could he find Kellstone and would he be allowed to stay?

María Teresa asked, "Esteban's the one who shrieked *We aren't Gypsies!* when we got to the big camp?"

"No, that was his kid brother Palmiro."

The first emergency camp on a farmer's fields had been a sea of tents, the piles of straw inside intended to stuff mattresses, although at first the straw appeared to be the entire bedding. Most of the children came from high-rise flats in industrial cities. After the horrid seasickness during the storm in the Bay of Biscay, a tent resembling a pigsty in a damp field had been the final straw for a little 'un from Bilbao.

María Teresa still had nightmares about bombs and incendiaries tumbling from the Junkers 52s of the Condor Legion as those trundled like trams through the sky, and the vicious strafing by Heinkel 51 fighters. Some nights she would walk in her sleep to the French windows of the lounge in Kellstone Abbey and cry out at the phantoms she saw, the heavens black with cruciform planes ushering the end of the world.

"I don't think Sir Richard could possibly let Esteban stay here," María Teresa told Josefina, "even if your cousin steals a bicycle, and has enough food, and the police don't stop him on the way here, which might take him *days,* sleeping in fields. One boy among all us girls. That wouldn't do!"

"How about if Esteban behaves really badly so they decide to transfer him to *wherever* else?" persisted Josefina. "The way Laureana was transferred?"

Laureana, who was precocious, had scared girls at her previous colony with wild talk about *rape.* For a while here likewise, until Laureana calmed down thanks to lots of attention from Señorita Akorda and the beneficent atmosphere of the abbey.

Whatever *rape* was exactly. Something painful, dirty, and violent that Franco's Moroccan Moors, ruthless Rif tribesman, did to helpless girls to celebrate conquering a town and to terrorize the survivors. From time to time fear gripped all the children at what might have happened to their families prior to the intervention by the British Expeditionary Force.

"Well now," said María Teresa, "the Committee would never send a boy here, even if Esteban begged. Besides, isn't his little brother at that same sanatorium? Your cousin has a duty to look out for his brother."

"Esteban doesn't like his brother much. He calls him Stinky."

"That makes no difference, Josefina. You shouldn't have told Esteban how lovely it is here."

Once upon a time Kellstone Abbey had been a monastery, until the English king Enrique VIII suppressed the Catholic Church and gave the place to one of his cronies who tore it down and used the stones to build himself a very fine manor house. Around the mansion, lawns that were now raggedly grazed by sheep gave way to extensive woodlands fringing serene little lakes where swans and ducks swam. Monarchs had stayed in the Royal Bedrooms that the Hensleys now occupied, while the girls shared a score of bedrooms, each graced with a bath. The attic floor housed the redoubtable cook, Mrs. Tucker, and several live-in employees from the nearby village as well as a tutor, Mrs. Eagleton, who had taught English in Barcelona before she was widowed by a street accident.

Meals, taken in a grand hall with a gallery for minstrels, had to conform to the ten shillings per week that the government allowed the Basque Children's Committee to spend, but extra eggs were plentiful. Hundreds of books, many bound in old leather, lined a library, these days the schoolroom. The whole drafty building cried out for repairs and renovations, though the corridors were grand for running and sliding along, and the grounds for rambling, so long as the day was dry, while collecting small logs that two local fellows sawed up from plentiful fallen branches, to be fed to the hot-wa-

ter boiler in the basement. In a courtyard, the girls practiced Basque dances accompanied by Señorita Akorda on an accordion, a spare borrowed from local Morris dancers: every weekend a wheezing bus took a party of the girls around the county to perform to raise funds. Akorda's name had nothing to do with accordions except for the fact that she could play the Basque diatonic button version, the trikiti, the "hell's bellows" as reactionary priests disparaged it; adapting had been easy enough for her nimble fingers.

"My name," she had told Mrs. Eagleton, "may signify memory. Or maybe *home*—houses in villages near Vizcaya are called akorda together with the name of the family. But akorda might also mean *stony ground.*" Now that war had come and she was in exile, would seed ever fertilize that ground? This wasn't a very suitable thought.

At first the girls had been puzzled at what sort of socialist Sir Richard was, and thought he must be a revolutionary who had expropriated the previous denizen of this abbey that wasn't an abbey, at the same time, somehow, as taking over his title of Lord. The girls themselves had imbibed socialism with their mothers' milk. Back at that first big camp, arguments and even fisticuffs had broken out between socialist kids and communist kids and anarchist kids and the pious kids who wanted an independent religious Basque nation. So here at Kellstone Abbey all the children were socialist.

Esteban's unhappiness obviously preyed upon Josefina's mind, especially since she realized how she herself was partly responsible for that misery by telling her cousin too enthusiastically about Kellstone Abbey, bragging without thinking of the consequences.

Still, maybe Sir Richard could do *something* for Esteban?

The very first item on the news was that General Blair had sustained a shrapnel wound in his throat when a lone Messerschmitt 109 had emptied its fuselage bomb rack near to Blair's mobile headquarters in its attempt to escape from pursuing British Hawker Hurricanes. General Blair was already recovering well and could speak quietly. The BEF's thrust to relieve the siege of Madrid continued unaffected. encountering moderate resistance.

The girls, at first anxious, applauded.

"That," drawled Sir Richard afterward, Mrs. Eagleton translating, "was a rather fine piece of propaganda. Blair himself might have had a hand."

Mrs. Eagleton interrupted. "I don't understand how Blair being injured can have anything *fine* about it!"

"Consider. We aren't reluctant to announce his injury, along with believable details. Since the German plane was alone, this is merely a rogue accident. *Alone*, note, as if there's only one of them left out of maybe a squadron, and that one running away. A Condor Legion German, scared by our Hurricanes—thank God and Lord Beaverbrook's pressure that those got into production quickly. Even so, I happen to know that those German 109s can normally out-fly our Hurricanes easily purely as fighters. Adding a loaded bomb rack of course slows the 109s somewhat."

"So the Messerschmitt may in fact have gotten away afterward?"

Sir Richard wagged a finger. "The news doesn't actually say the German pilot was shot down; it merely implies so. Since Hitler still maintains the pretense that all his pilots and ground forces are volunteer advisers accompanying equipment leased to Franco, the Nazi government can't even comment."

"But we're being out-flown?" Mrs. Eagleton was a devil for accuracy, which was good in a teacher, and angular besides, as regards to her face and her stance. "And what does *moderate* resistance mean?"

"It may well be, my dear," said Lady Hensley, "that we have something rather nippier than a Messerschmitt in the wings! That's to say, in the *theatrical* sense of wings—" But Sir Richard shifted his finger to his lips.

"How," ventured Akorda, "can General Blair 'have a hand' in the news if his throat is injured?"

"By scribbling." Sir Richard mimed writing in the air. "Odd chap, that Blair! Did I ever mention he and I were at Eton at the same time?"

"No . . ." and Akorda explained in English for the benefit of whomever amongst the Basque girls was following: "Eton is a school for the sons of the rich. In England, these expensive private schools are called *public* schools. Much in England is not rational, for example the spelling or the pronouncing of hundreds of words."

Several girls, who understood this all too well, laughed delightedly.

"The tough dough made me cough," piped up Carmen Etxarte.

"No, Carmen, you still get *cough* wrong," said Mrs. Eagleton before proceeding to nuance Akorda: "In fact public schools such as Eton are ancient. Before them, apart from church and monastery schools, the only teaching was by tutors to individual rich boys at home. Consequently, gathering twenty or thirty rich boys together in a central place *was* public education."

"Blair wasn't a rich boy," Sir Richard said. "He had a scholarship."

"*Una beca,*" supplied Mrs. Eagleton.

"So he and I didn't normally mix," Sir Richard went on. "Though it was difficult to miss Blair entirely, him being so tall. You might say he *stood out* on Salisbury Plain when we were doing OTC."

"That's Officer Training Corps," supplied Lady Hensley. "Public school boys need to learn to use guns."

"In case of a people's revolution?" asked Akorda.

"Not exactly. Though of course there *was* the General Strike . . . but that happened when Richard was already at Magdalen. That's the Oxford college. Pronounced *maudlin* in Oxford and Cambridge, because they think they're special. Everywhere else people say *magdalena*. Likewise the river Thames isn't called the Thames while flowing through Oxford; it's called the Isis, after an Egyptian goddess."

Carmen frowned. "But *magdalena* is a cake, not a college . . ."

"Never mind that for the moment, dear girl," said Mrs. Eagleton. "Sir Richard, you were saying about Blair and the OTC?"

"Blair was a bit of a mystery as to what he thought, because maybe he didn't yet know what he thought. I heard he took some esoteric theology book to Salisbury Plain to study, though he seemed not to believe in a God. . . . Well, most of us were confirmed at Eton, but that was the done thing. Of course for him the *Catholic* church was a dictatorship plain and simple. . . ."

"At least the Basque bishops supported the Republic," said Akorda, pursing her lips with disdain for bishops as a category.

"That bit of support from a few bishops wasn't unimportant," Sir Richard said didactically, though a shade confusingly as regards the double negative, "considering that Blum risked possible civil war in France, Catholics versus Socialists, by insisting on supplying artillery to the Spanish Republic. Nor were the French general staff exactly delighted! Of course Hitler rubbed his hands with glee and kept quiet, because the artillery came from the Maginot line, but nowadays Hitler isn't quite so happy. . . . I do remember Blair telling someone he bought his first gun over the counter when he was ten. A Saloon Rifle, that's what it was. Good at short range."

"Any schoolboy could *buy* a rifle?"

"Akorda," continued Sir Richard, "Blair was of a certain class. Local people knew his father was in the Burma Imperial Police. To become a policeman in Burma you needed to pass an examination in Latin and Greek, consequently you were a gentleman. I did run into Blair a few times later on. Apparently his father had hoped Blair would follow in his own footsteps, but Blair's mother feared the climate out East might wreck her boy's health, being as how his bronchial tubes were poor; and mother prevailed. With grave reservations, Blair chose to go for an army commission and he found he liked the life well enough, even though he was beginning to think politically and was risking his hand at some journalism, strictly under pseudonyms of

course, about the bad things he saw coming, using trusted friends as go-betweens with editors because a serving officer shouldn't express political opinions publicly. . . . Our Eric Blair did have a deep vein of the dictatorial about him, as well as being sensitively sorry for the oppressed and distrusting power. Went well with his upper-crust Etonian drawl." Sir Richard winked, since he shared the same accent.

"Maybe *authoritarian* is a better word than dictatorial, my dear," suggested Lady Hensley, "considering what we think about demagogues and dictators?"

At that moment Josefina put her hand up. "Please, Mister Richard, can you help my cousin . . . ?"

In fact they were to hear General Blair's voice on the radio only a couple of evenings later from the Spanish front, wherever exactly that was.

"Fellow Britons, fellow believers in freedom," came a soft staccato croak, which nevertheless conveyed sublime calm and power, as if the very best kind of big brother were invisibly by one's side, "our British Expeditionary Force of heroes is gaining by the day in giving a lesson to the dark forces of dictatorships. A well-deserved and veritable caning! Our praiseworthy preferences for peace after the miseries of the first war were great, yet in recent years wise minds knew that something had to be done, and now by God we are doing so!" The repetition of the Ps seemed to associate Blair personally with peace.

"To have peace," the voice continued, "we must sometimes have war—and this cannot be done without much bloody sweat on the part of all decent folk, thus it is only fitting that I myself should have contributed a little such personally three days ago—yet today I particularly wish to single out Rifleman Albert Jones from Cardiff who is being recommended for the Military Cross after single-handedly storming a rebel machine-gun position despite sustaining serious, though not fatal, wounds. . . ."

Afterward, Sir Richard said, "Mind you, Léon Blum got away with intervention by the skin of his teeth!"

"Por los pelos," interpreted Mrs. Eagleton for the benefit of girls who never before had skin on their teeth. "By the hairs" made a lot more sense.

"Got away with?" queried Akorda. "He stole . . . ?"

Drat the English for all their phrasal verbs! They imagined their language was easy because they favored short words, but one teeny verb such as *get* could be followed by a whole blackboard of pronouns and could end up meaning anything at all. Get up to, get by on, get on with—two different meanings to *that* one. . . .

"No, Akorda, stealing was Stalin's plan, under the guise of assisting the Republic. When it got out that—"

Got out . . . ?

"When it became known," supplied Mrs. Eagleton.

"—yes, became known that the Russians would sell war materials if the Republic transferred most of its gold reserves to Moscow at *half the international value* until the gold got used up—Peter Vansittart's spies, I mean diplomats, found that one out—well, the Republic sent *all of its gold* to Paris, and that tipped the balance—not least since Spain had the fourth largest gold reserves in the world!"

"I've some very nice news," Lady Hensley chipped in to announce. "Two weeks on Saturday we'll all go by bus to Oxford, and you'll be able to dance on the lawn in the cloisters," and she glanced for assistance to Mrs. Eagleton.

"Claustros," said that lady. "Almost the same word. Not everything is so different."

"Well then, in the claustros at *Maudlin*. Richard's old college. He asked the president personally."

"But," said Akorda, "you have a prime minister and a king, not a president."

Lady Hensley laughed merrily. "Most Oxford colleges have masters as their heads,

but a few have presidents, and one has a warden. All the thirty or so colleges govern themselves, consequently there isn't any one *place* you can say is the University of Oxford. Our American friends often get confused."

"So do I," confessed Mrs. Eagleton.

"Also, Oxford students aren't called students, they're called undergraduates."

"And the Fellows aren't teachers, they're *dons.*"

A good Spanish word.

"In *los claustros,*" María Teresa asked in horror, "will *monjes* watch us dance?"

"Why should there be monkeys? Granted there's a deer park inside *Maudlin,* but the place isn't a zoo. Girls, the workers from the steel and car factories, as well as students, will come to see you."

"Will those workers be Socialists or Communists or Anarchists?" asked Akorda.

"Bless me, I've no idea."

On the appointed Saturday, all of the girls, except for a couple who'd come down with upset tummies, piled into the rickety old bus along with Akorda and Mrs. Eagleton, bound for Oxford. Mrs. Tucker would look after the disappointed duo whose misfortunes couldn't have anything to do with her cookery, otherwise all of the girls would be rushing to the toilet. Probably those two ate some filthy fungus they found in the woods. Sir Richard and his wife proceeded ahead in his Riley Sprite two-seater; they'd be lunching in college with a politically friendly history Fellow who'd helped to appease the head gardener regarding foreign brats prancing on his most prized lawn.

The bus grumbled and creaked along for over an hour before finally disgorging the girls at Oxford's Gloucester Green bus station, till quite recently a cattle market. Patriotic Union flags hung as bunting, and delightfully some ikurriña flags, red field with a white cross and a green St. Andrew's cross symbolizing the sacred oak tree of Guernica that the Condor Legion had failed to incinerate. The girls, in their long white-banded skirts and red pinafores, cheered.

A small Salvation Army band struck up, to lead the way to Maudlin College; consequently Mrs. Eagleton needn't worry any more about remembering the litany of *George Street, Cornmarket, The High,* as she and Akorda led the crocodile. Shoppers clapped.

Grand sandstone edifices lined much of the High Street as it curved to bring into view the massive turreted tower of Maudlin. A crowd greeted the procession of girls as they reached the gatehouse, to be met by Sir Richard and Lady Hensley and a chubby chap wearing a scarlet and grey gown, looking like some cardinal. Amidst their families, some workers waved red flags, others the flag of the Republic, red, yellow, and purple, watched with stern disapproval by several men in dark suits wearing bowler hats. Elegantly dressed fresh-faced undergraduates, some in blazers and boaters, milled about. They must have come up early.

"*¡Bienvenidas!*" proclaimed the chap, oops don, in the gown to the girls; then, making a megaphone with his hands, he called out to the crowd, "I say: nobody will be admitted to college carrying any political symbols. We are here today simply to enjoy the dancing of these brave young refugees displaced by war, and to give generously toward their upkeep and the good work of the Basque Children's Committee. The Bulldogs will confiscate any flags."

"*Bulldogs?*" queried Akorda, who could see none anywhere, nor conceive how even the best-trained dogs could confiscate anything.

"Those chaps in the bowler hats," Sir Richard told her quickly.

"Wearing *sombreros de hongo,*" supplied Mrs. Eagleton.

"The university police," said Sir Richard.

The quadrangle of lawn within the cloisters was a striped wonder of apple-green

and emerald that might have been cut with nail scissors, surrounded on all sides by mullioned arches beneath mullion-windowed rooms, above which gargoyles jutted, crowned by crenellations from which stone finials rose high, partly hiding the sloping slate roofs.

"*Es un puto monasterio,*" hissed Laureana, but friends hushed her.

A burly presumed head gardener in baggy trousers and a waistcoat, sleeves rolled up, scrutinized from under a flat cap the innocent flat white footwear of the girls, an uprooted KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign tucked under his arm reproachfully. He needn't worry too much: for decency there'd be no high leaps in the girls' dances. Presently the arches became crowded with spectators, town mixing amicably enough with gown. Soon enough Akorda struck up on her squeezebox for a *mutxikoak*, an ancestor dance in a circle. . . .

The incident happened after another five delightful dances followed by a choral song. As the sound of the accordion died away, this time with a soft clear clarinet tone, to applause, a shout of *Get back 'ere, you!* pursued a body dodging its way nimbly through the crowd behind the mullions, alternating with *Beg pardon, Sir, Ma'am,* as a bowler-hatted Bulldog strove to keep up.

Through the stone gateway that was the only access to the lawn erupted a ragged urchin with a huge mop of brylcreemed black hair, straw and stray feathers entangled in it, who came to a sudden halt, enchanted.

"Josefina!" he cried out, stepping forward on to the sward in bare feet.

"Esteban!" exclaimed Josefina, wide-eyed.

As the Bulldog in his big black shoes, *which might even be hob-nailed,* beg-pardoned his way through the blazers and dresses crowding that gateway and advanced purposefully on to the turf, the head gardener launched himself forward, ignoring the bare-footed lad, veritably growling at the Bulldog while brandishing the KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign.

This confrontation allowed Esteban to reach his cousin, who hugged him.

"What have you done, Josefina?!" exclaimed Akorda.

"I . . . I only wrote him a letter . . . saying we were coming . . . to Oxford . . . to dance . . . in a college with a name that isn't said the way it's spelled. . . ." And Josefina burst into tears, the enormity of her indiscretion becoming clear to her.

"And Esteban could find a town like Oxford, even if he could never find Kellstone Abbey!"

"I'm sorry I interrupted you," piped up Esteban in Basque, "but that angry man was chasing me. . . ."

"You look like a scarecrow," said Akorda.

At that moment, blessedly some undergraduates raised a cheer, triggering applause all around the cloisters. Even so, when the girls trooped off the grass back through the gateway, since their performance had now evidently reached a natural conclusion, the Bulldog arrested Esteban with an iron grip on the lad's arm.

Thus Esteban missed the picnic of egg and cress sandwiches accompanied by lemonade on a much vaster lawn reached through a narrow stone passageway, fallow deer grazing in their railed park nearby.

"Behold," declared Lady Hensley as she presided, "not a monkey in sight! If we exclude one naughty and now departed boy. . . ."

Sir Richard's gowned Don soon achieved the release of Esteban.

What to do with the lad? Word had spread quickly. Sir Richard felt obliged to refuse the charitable offer from the Socialist Workers Anti-Fascist War Committee (whose members had waved those flags) to house the boy with a family close to the Pressed

Steel factory—much too politically provocative. After some telephoning, Esteban was placed as a temporary measure in the Basque colony at Witney, famed for its woolen blankets that came from the thousands of local sheep, and a dozen miles closer to Kellstone Abbey than Oxford city was. The returning bus would drop him off there; so at least Esteban was able to spend a little more time on the way with Josefina.

Come the Monday, as well as celebrating the Basque dances in Maudlin, the *Oxford Mail* featured a runaway ragamuffin story, provoking a letter in the Tuesday edition harrumphing about bicycle-thieving ingrates. "Blair's War" of intervention wasn't to everyone's liking, opponents ranging all the way from idealistic pacifists and pragmatic appeasers right through to Oswald Mosley's blackshirts, whose admiration for the Third Reich was extravagant and (one hoped) ridiculous. By Tuesday evening a right-wing Tory M.P. was asking in Parliament why those refugees' children hadn't *already* been repatriated, if the campaign of the British Expeditionary Force was going so dashed well apart from minor reverses? Well, the Francophobe Duchess of Atholl pitched in, and the red squire Cripps, although in the Lords the Marquis of Bute called again for a halt to intervention; that bastard had sold off half of Cardiff to fund the rebel generals, and he wasn't the only supporter of Franco amongst the great and the good in Britain and in America, too.

On the Thursday evening, to the nation's surprise, General Blair contributed by radio in a jerky rasp.

"Fellow Britons, I recoil from war at the same time as I engage in it, for war can corrupt those who wage it—but we are putting our very souls, our free unblemished souls, into this crusade against dictatorship, and failure is inconceivable." Then, rather than singling out a British soldier as hero of the day, he whispered hoarsely:

"It has come to my attention that a Spanish lad of twelve named Esteban, or in plain English Stephen, bravely and ingeniously made his way almost two hundred and fifty miles through what to him is a strange and foreign country, our England, to rejoin his beloved sister, who by an oversight was placed far away from him in one of the refuges we provided." A self-deprecating cough. "Stephen's sense of geography may well be rather better than my own . . ."

The jerky rasp continued. "Stephen's is the sort of pluck and perseverance that inspires our troops every single day in our fight to restore freedom, democracy, and decency to all of Spain so that ordinary families can live in peace and at least moderate prosperity without fear."

"But I am not Esteban's *sister,*" said Josefina.

Sir Richard grinned. "Sister sounds better as propaganda. Or maybe Blair simply made a mistake."

Akorda looked mischievous. "A *blare* means a loud sound, yes? Like the blast of a trumpet?"

"With a different spelling, dear," said Mrs. Eagleton.

"So the general could have signed his political pieces in newspapers as by *Mr. Blare* with the different spelling."

"Clever idea, Akorda," said Sir Richard, "but that wasn't Blair's pen-name. Now what was it, what was it? Oh yes, he took the name of the river that flows through Ipswich where his parents' house was. The river Orwell. He called himself George Orwell."

In the Spring of 1939, while the British army was still busy assisting the rescued Spanish Republic to repair itself and root out the last rebels, the forces of the Nazi Reich swiftly smashed an armored, air-supported corridor fifty kilometers wide through a plucky if puny Poland as access for Hitler's victorious invasion of Russia while all remained quiet on his western frontiers. Soon the Führer's voice sounded from Siegfriedstadt, formerly Leningrad, and a fortnight later from the ruins of Moscow. ❍

Paul Di Filippo has been publishing stories since his first appearance in 1977. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, Howard P. Lovecraft's old burg, with his mate of thirty-seven years, Deborah Newton. His non-fiction shows up regularly in *The Barnes & Noble Review,* and *Locus Online,* as well as this magazine. His new collection, *Wikiworld and Other Imaginary Latitudes,* will debut from Chizine Press in early 2013. Collaborating fairly frequently with Rudy Rucker, he always defers in matters of gonzo ribofunk to his elder partner.

Rudy Rucker is a writer, a mathematician, and a former computer science professor. He received Philip K. Dick awards for his cyberpunk novels *Software* and *Wetware,* now available in the Ware Tetralogy. His fantasy California novel of the afterlife, *Jim and the Flims,* appeared in 2011, as did his autobiography, *Nested Scrolls,* which received the Emperor Norton Award. Rudy recently published a 1950's alien invasion tale called *The Turing Chronicles,* and his current novel in progress is *The Big Aha.* The author's mastery of "gnarly transrealism" can be seen in full force in the delectable . . .

YUBBA VINES

Rudy Rucker & Paul Di Filippo

"Lifter," said Bengt, looking up from his computer tablet. "It's right near us tonight. My friend Olala has been messaging me about it. He always knows the deep underground stuff. Lifter is this unmarked transient chrome diner? It's been drifting around Boston for a few weeks. Let's run over there and eat." With a slight effort Bengt arose from the collapsed cushions of their whipped old couch.

"You're talking about a hipster food truck?" asked Cammy, glancing up from her own screen at the kitchen table. "For our big evening out?" She brushed back her dark hair with one hand. It was a gesture that Bengt loved.

"Well, you know Olala," said Bengt. "He's a countercountercountercultural obscu-

rationist. He's never even told me where he's from. Maybe Lifter is retro instead of hipster. Hearty fare for working folks who aren't afraid to say I love you."

"I'm not hearty," said Cammy, her pretty face a dusky oval in the apartment's fading light. "I'm a sarcastic social parasite, *verdad?*"

"Oh, that's just your web persona," said Bengt. "Your career. But I know the real Cammy, you little slyboots. At least you *have* a career. By the way, Olala says Lifter is cheap. I figure they scour the planet for the rock-bottom ingredients. Thailand, Turkistan, Tunisia. Non-locavore and proud of it."

"I'm supposed to eat swill standing on the street? The cut-rate slop spotting my sadly eager evening-wear?"

"We'll be sitting at a nice table," said Bengt. "The Lifter diner is a giant tractor-trailer truck where you go inside. Come on now, Cammy. It'll be a kick."

There wasn't anyone outside the unmarked Lifter truck. Bengt had to pound on the side of the silver trailer to get in. At the head of three folding steps, the entrance was a shiny chrome rectangle that spun on its center axis—like a rudimentary revolving door. As Cammy passed through, the door caught up with her and tapped her butt. Like it was taking her measure. Looking back from the inside, she found herself completely unable to see the lines of the door against the wall. A one-way entrance.

"Tonight specials bean pork, duck plum, or both in combo," said a chef, barely taller than the waist-high sill of the kitchen's window. "My name Barb." The woman wore a green T-shirt, a maroon apron, and a dangling twinkly necklace. Even though she looked like an aging white schoolteacher, her accent was something like Filipino. Odd. "We got ice-cream too," added Barb, waving a two-tined fork. "What you preferring?"

"Falafel with mint tea?" said Cammy.

"No problemo. Mister?"

"The pork duck combo," said Bengt. "And a pistachio milkshake?"

"No problemo," repeated the cook. "Sit. Relax. No charge for first visit Lifter. You pay later, pay a lot." She laughed.

"Sweet," said Bengt uncertainly.

The truck's interior was dimly lit, with mirrored walls that made it hard to judge the space's size. An exit sign glowed on the far wall. The tables were reasonably sized, the chairs quite normal. The other diners were reassuringly random, some in pairs, some alone. Not down-and-outers, and not excessively hip. A few of them seemed somehow ecstatic. Slumped in their chairs.

"You think Lifter is religious?" asked Cammy as she and Bengt took their seats. "Free food is like a church shelter or a Krishna picnic."

"Could be some kind of promo," said Bengt. "I couldn't find any info about Lifter on the web at all. I just have those messages from Olala. He uses a special encryption that he and his buddies made up. Jah-code."

With an unsettling nimbleness, Barb the cook wriggled across the room, apron flapping. Bringing their plates. A thick stew for Bengt, and a very presentable pita with falafel balls for Cammy. Cammy watched as her husband tasted his meaty porridge.

"Awesome," mumpfed Bengt, mouth full. His spoon was already ladling up his second bite.

Cammy bit into her falafel. The pita dough was light and soft. The crisp fried garbanzo balls were nestled in creamy hummus, slathered with cucumbers in yogurt, and streaked with a rich red hot sauce. And the tea was a revelation. It was as if Cammy had never really had mint tea before.

They ate in silence, savoring the meal.

"Unspeakably toothsome," said Cammy when she finished. "Good call, Bengt. I'm surprised this place isn't completely full. And with a huge line around the block."

"It's hard to find Lifter," said Bengt, siphoning up the last of his pale green milkshake. "Olala says the truck moves around all the time. Very weird."

"I like being in on a secret," said Cammy. "Maybe I shouldn't even try to post about this place." She paused, considering. "But, nah. If I post, I'll be breaking fresh news. Good for my numbers. In fact—" She drew out her ever present smart phone, captured some video of the dimly glittering space, and added a few keystrokes. And then she frowned. "Damn. It uploaded, but not to the right site. It's on something called Wiggleweb? What's that supposed to—"

Just then the music started, a sweet reggae dub tape, played very loud; a bass line was running an insinuating melody over the percussive double-strums of a guitar. A seriously fat white guy hopped onto a tiny stage near the exit sign. He was pale as dough, shorthaired and clean-shaven, attired in nerdly sweatshirt and khakis. He wore a dangly glowing necklace like that of Barb the cook.

Wobbling to the beat, the man began singing authentic reggae. In the break after the first song he introduced himself, delivering his words in a zestful Jamaican patois. "A man named Majek Wobble made me Churchill Breakspeare, ya know. I and I *rastafarize* you."

During the next song, Churchill stepped down from the stage and began trucking from table to table. His smoothly flowing voice had no need of a microphone. Some of the other guests seemed already to know him.

During the next break, the singer paused by Bengt. "I surely see you again. The cut of your jib so fine."

"I'm Bengt and this is Cammy. You're a great singer."

"Irie," said the doughy Churchill.

Bengt's attention was caught by Churchill's necklace. It was a loose string adorned by luminous scraps—shimmering rods, glittering lumps, patterned scrolls, tufts of threads. He'd never seen anything like it before. It was garish and . . .

"Hypnotic," murmured Cammy, fascinated by the necklace as well. She looked up at Churchill, almost at a loss for words. "I don't, ah, understand your business model?"

"We feed our people high and tall," said Churchill Breakspeare. "And down the line, we reap." He called out toward the corner kitchen. "Our guests want toothy treats, Sistah Barb!"

"How do you manage that accent?" asked Cammy. "It's uncanny."

"You'll learn before you know," said Churchill, patting his peculiar necklace. "Like Majek Wobble."

Barb the cook was at their table again, bubbling with equivocal laughter. The dessert plates glowed with—luminous pudding. Dark shapes lurked within.

"Living food," said Churchill. "Grow your glow." He swept the little Barb into his plump arms and the two of them began skanking around the room, with Churchill's voice lilting in another island song. By now some of the other guests had left, and the remaining ones seemed zonked.

The effects of the dessert were dizzying and hard to recall. Bengt's sense of it was that he and Cammy lounged in their Lifter chairs for quite a long time, feeling ambitious, expansive and proud of themselves. At some point they decided to go home—and this wasn't entirely easy.

All of the other guests had disappeared. Churchill and Barb were huddled in the corner kitchen, perhaps preparing the next day's food. By now Cammy and Bengt didn't feel like any further interactions with their vaguely disturbing hosts.

"The exit sign," Bengt said, pointing. He and Cammy walked there holding hands—as if making their way through a frightening forest. The dim Lifter space seemed more cavernous than before. The empty tables and chairs were like toy fur-

niture from a dollhouse. Small flittery shapes darted around the room's edges, never directly in view, visible only from the corners of one's eyes.

No actual door could be seen beneath the glowing exit sign. But when Cammy instinctively pressed herself to the wall, a narrow rectangle opened and she tumbled through—Bengt heard her cursing at her rough landing on the street.

Bengt pressed himself against the wall too, and he could feel the material beginning to thin. But at the last moment one of the room's rapid peripheral shapes sped close and nipped his left ear. He felt more than heard the sound of the punch—a juicy crunch of cartilage. He began screaming.

The wall opened up a rectangle just wide enough for Bengt to squeeze through. On his way out, he heard Churchill Breakspeare's voice echoing from within the Lifter trailer.

"Harvest party tomorrow."

Bengt and Cammy made their way home through the shady back streets of Boston and conked out on their bed without even talking. The experience had been so disorienting that Bengt didn't think to check on what had happened to his ear until the next morning. And then it was Cammy who pointed it out.

"Oh god, they tagged you. It's a yellow-green disk with weird runic symbols on it. I'd call the color chartreuse? High visibility. Like something you'd see on a wild animal from an endangered species."

Bengt fingered the oddly slick tag, took a look in the mirror. Kind of cool. Like a high-hole earring, but it didn't have a removable back. Tentatively, he tugged at it. The gaudy tag resisted, inflicting pain proportional to any pressure. He relented.

"Well, it's no weirder than half the jewelry you see on the street," he said defensively. "Urban primitive. Maybe it's like some kinda Lifter customer loyalty card? Latest tech, I bet! Favored status, bargains galore! I guess Churchill dug me."

Cammy looked at Bengt as if she were inspecting a pickled specimen at a carnival freakshow, a jar in a medical teratology museum. "Or maybe he picked up on what a pushover you are. You're the guy who gives money to those just-need-five-dollars-to-catch-a-bus-back-home street scammers. Are you saying it doesn't bother you—being microchipped like a three-toed sloth?"

"Not one whit," blathered Bengt. He still felt a little giddy from that magical pudding dessert. "Not if it means free delicious grub like we had last night. How is this any more humiliating than food stamps? Being unemployed, I've gotta cut corners, gotta manage the ol' nonexistent cash flow."

"Listen, we're getting by fine with my video blogs and sock-puppet reviews and online ads. I told you not to worry. We're married. I'll take care of you."

"Yeah, okay, but I'm ashamed. I still can't believe that my Brown University bachelor's degree in semiotics with a minor in French isn't good for anything! And meanwhile my student loans are as big as an elephant's balls, and they're not getting any smaller."

"You'll get your chance, Bengt," said Cammy, patting his cheek. "I still believe in you. But now I've got to get cranking on the edits for my new instructional video. *How To Clean Your Own Fugu Fish.*"

"You could afford a fugu?"

"I'm not using a real one. Just a sand dab. Looks the same on the video. I never did find that video I tried to upload last night, by the way. And there's no sign of a Wiggleweb. I guess that weird food made us kind of high."

"A lot of questions," said Bengt.

"Why don't you go see your pal Olala?" suggested Cammy. "A visit to his cave always cheers you up. Find out what's the deal with Lifter. And ask him about that silly tag in your ear. And while you're at it, maybe you and your old pal can do some

career networking?" A giggle escaped Cammy. "He might know of a job deconstructing old issues of *Paris Match* magazine."

Bengt felt miffed by Cammy's slight upon his chosen field. "Johnny Hallyday is a king, Cammy, and don't forget it! You've heard me singing his songs. His wife Sylvie Vartan was the *Blondie* of the yé-yé era. That's too dated? How about pop philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, his heavily cosmeticized wife Arielle Dombasle, and his billionaire mistress Daphne Guinness? *Paris Match* has a great tag line for Lévy. *God is dead, but my hair is perfect.* The dude puts the I in triangle, to lift a phrase."

"I and I," said Cammy gaily. "Leave me to my faux fugu, oh dog-tagged sage."

Olala Ogallala lived in a conceptual art project. He and some of his layabout computer hacker buddies had, by studying snitched blueprints, discovered a sealed-off, oddly non-Euclidean, empty windowless space in the upper reaches of a local mall. They'd covertly broken through into the concrete chamber, then furnished it by stealthily trucking in cast-off furniture via the attached parking garage. Tapping into the mall's electricity and water completed their homesteading. And waste management consisted of a reeking chemical toilet. But Olala's pals had soon tired of the inconveniently situated playroom, leaving the industrial-strength burrow to its lone eccentric tenant.

Having confirmed via jah-coded message that Olala was accepting callers, Bengt essayed the twisted path to the man's living quarters. Up oil-strewn ramps, dodging departing and arriving carloads of consumers, through toxic exhaust fumes, past the deliberately misangled video cameras, around an insulation-foam-slathered pillar. Lift aside a draped piece of tarp camouflaged to look just like the wall, and bingo-bango, home sweet home!

A man of indeterminate ethnicity and race, Olala sported a massive crop of dreads. He'd twined bits of wire into the locks, giving him the look of a dark dandelion. Olala claimed some Native American and Romany blood, among numerous other strains. Today, as he often did, he wore filched coveralls bearing the logo of the mall's maintenance squad: useful camouflage.

Olala waved hello to Bengt without taking his eyes off his funky old laptop's screen. "Make yourself at home, ligand. Catalytic helper molecule that you are. Bind onto my magnificence. I got sorghum beer in the fridge."

Olala had picked up a learned style of discourse during his senior year at Brown with Bengt. He'd shown up, seemingly out of nowhere, and had somehow conned the university into letting him earn a BS degree in computer science during a single year, during which he'd redesigned the school's entire network for them. Olala's year of wonder had overlapped with Bengt's senior year, and the two of them had some wild times together. Bengt had always seemed to amuse his freewheeling friend.

Bengt popped the cap off an unlabeled bottle of homebrew and chugged. Tasty, but lacking some of its usual kick and savor. A patina of ghost flavors from Lifter remained on his tongue, rendering common foodstuffs bland.

"So Cammy and I went to Lifter last night," said Bengt. "I'm still a little twisted."

"Good," said Olala. "That's what we like to see. Let me push you a little further. Look at this documentary about chix and shedders." He flashed Bengt a sly smile.

"Chicks and shredders? Like the skateboard scene?"

"Way wrong, Dong Dong. The lobster industry. Chix are the youngsters, illegal to trap 'em. Shedders are the somewhat flexible soft-shelled lobsters. They're a good catch at certain times. But how do you think the fishermen filter out the chix, huh?"

Knowing Olala's penchant for high-tech gadgets, Bengt ventured, "Underwater laser interferometry tape measures?"

"Ha! They use a simple slit! All size lobsters enter the alluring trap. But only bitty ones can squeeze out the slit. Self-selecting! An elegant hack! *Feast* your eyes on these images, you tasty dude. Let your mind roam."

Olala slider-slid the video backward and Bengt looked over his shoulder while it ran again. Why exactly was Olala showing him this?

Just to be saying something, Bengt asked, "So what happens if a lobster enters the trap at chix size, but then stays and eats so much bait it gets too fat to escape?"

"Tough titty, bro," said Olala. "It gets all *Hotel California* weepy. The consumer is trapped by greed."

"If lobsters were smarter, it wouldn't work," said Bengt.

Olala stared pityingly at his friend. "God, you're slow, Bengt. Free food? Big box? Hard to get out?"

The penny dropped. Dizzy from the idea, Bengt collapsed into one of Olala's ragged armchairs. "The Lifter people—you're saying they're like *lobstermen?* They want to *catch* Cammy and me?"

"What it is," said Olala. "They took my brah Majek Wobble day before yesterday."

"God—I think I heard this guy Churchill saying that name last night. I'm so dizzy from that dessert they gave me. Majek is, uh—"

"Reggae musician, mon. When I went to Lifter two days ago, I took Majek with me. I met him after one of his shows at a club this weekend. Smoking spliffs, talking Jah. I took him to Lifter. And he didn't get out."

"What are you saying? They kidnapped him?"

"When you saw *Churchill* at Lifter last night," said Olala, narrowing his eyes. "Was he putting on some type of performance?"

"He was singing," said Bengt. "He has this amazing reggae voice. Even though he's totally whitebread. But he, uh, yeah, he did say he learned from Majek Wobble."

"Here's how it went. I go to Lifter two days ago to show Majek a big time. We lie around in there all day eating and smoking ganja, they don't care. We have a triple helping of the radiant pudding, and then another and then another. Everyone pigging out and feeling wavy. And then the vibe gets very tight. The truck engine starts, *varoom*. People running for the exit door. They can't get out, hardly none of them. Majek Wobble was skinny, but now he's too fat. I'm fat too, but I—well, I know how to shed."

"You sloughed off an outer layer like a shedder lobster," said Bengt, not taking this very seriously.

"Don't smile, ligand. I want you uptight. Otherwise this show's no fun. Earlier this week Churchill was singing Vegas crooner, you know. Total shit. But now he swallowed up Majek Wobble and he can sing and talk Jamaican. Proof positive. Aha!"

Bengt was weary of this mind-game. He looked around Olala's cave and shook his head. "Cammy and I had a really fun time last night. It's been awhile since things went that well. And I was glad you'd sent me there. I felt like I had a friend. And now you have to start on this weird trip about Lifter being a trap. You're bumming me out."

"It's good if you're bummed. More interesting. But I've warned you, and you'll still have a chance when you go back."

"What do you know about this tag in my ear, asshole?"

Olala gave Bengt another of his significant smiles. "I assume you, ah, didn't pick out the gewgaw yourself? No? Well—maybe it's like when the lobstermen tag an especially juicy specimen. So they can spot him when he returns."

"I want it off!" said Bengt, yanking impatiently at the chartreuse disk. He saw spots and the pain made the room go dark. But he didn't let up. "Get some pliers and crush it, Olala!"

"*Calmo,*" said Olala. "You want to be keeping that tag." He rooted through the rubbish at the edges of the room and returned with a craft-saw mounted onto the body of an electric drill. "I'll cut the earring-post for you."

A few minutes later, the garish tag lay on Olala's desk. Olala patched the really

quite tiny puncture in Bengt's ear with a scrap of tape. Relieved to be free, Bengt used his smart phone to photograph the earring from several angles. He fed the images into his web search tool. No matches.

"Shouldn't expect any," said Olala, shaking his head. "Not on the straight web. I happen to know there's a network-level filter routine to block out anything having to do with Lifter. A filter that's omnipresent malware in the Man's servers. But there *is* stuff about Lifter on the *Wiggleweb*. That's a jah-code encrypted Internet relay chat thing that me and my posse use. We're making, like, a documentary."

"Nobody tells me anything."

"You're a semiotics major, man. You're lower than chix. But you'll get your chance."

"I need to go back to Lifter," said Bengt, brushing the teasing aside. He'd been suddenly sandbagged by a memory of the savory food. "Right now. For lunch. If I can find the place."

Olala gave him yet another odd, sly look. "Oh, you'll find it. But let me put an app on your phone. Why? Let's pretend that it predicts Lifter's locations based on feeds from HowSquare, WebWhere, UseeMEseeU, and ShotSpotter. Yeah, yeah, that's what I'm saying it does."

"ShotSpotter?" said Bengt uncertainly. "Isn't that the software that cops use to pinpoint open-air gunfire?"

"Would make sense. If this app was in fact what I said it was. There's been some armed assaults against the Lifter truck lately. Tasty, tasty. People losing their heads. Next of kin, embittered friends—they're like: *Lifter stole my loved one!* The anger's building to a climax. *Who killed Majek Wobble?* I can see the posters, the benefit concert, the rabid midnight mob—" Olala trailed off, busy tweaking Bengt's phone.

"I'm really not sure where you're at," said Bengt.

"Skungy Olala in his filthy cave. Into his flaky, menacing head-trips. Where did Olala come from, anyway? What are his goals? Many questions. Here's your phone, ligand. Have a good time in the truck. Eat for hours and hours. And, dude, if you can—learn how to shed. It's a better ending if you do. Don't end up like Majek Wobble."

Utterly bewildered, Bengt pocketed his phone and his ear tag and left in a hurry, detouring through the mall proper to nosh on some free food-court samples. Maybe if he ate enough of that stuff he wouldn't need to go to Lifter.

But, as with Olala's beer, the tidbits of Popeye's fried chicken and Panda Express boneless ribs, usually so rewarding, failed to please. Nothing but Lifter food would do. Looking around the humdrum mall, Bengt realized that he really *did* think Olala was crazy. The Lifter truck was a soul-devouring lobster trap? Get out of here.

And okay—even if there was something sinister about the Lifter—Bengt was too sharp to trap. Why not go there, score another great meal, and get out of the place in time? He could do it.

Bengt studied the little disk of his ear tag. It was a comely object. A gift from the Lifter crew. The writing around its edge was indeed a bit like runes. Or maybe hieroglyphs. Pictograms. Would be interesting to work up a semiotic analysis of them, comparing the runes to cuneiform and to Linear B. A publishable paper in there, an entrée to grad school. That would be an answer to his job drought. Nestle into the bosom of Dame Academe.

But now, inescapably, his mind circled back to his one obsessive thought. His hunger. He pulled out his smart phone and fired up Olala's app. The app bleated, flickered, and died—leaving the phone in such a screwed-up state that Bengt had to reboot it via the on/off switch. And now the phone's server was labeled Wiggleweb. And Olala's app still wasn't doing squat.

What-fucking-ever. How to find Lifter? The ear tag! It was glowing along one edge. Like a digital compass.

Bengt left the mall, holding the ear tag flat in the palm of his hand, letting it lead him through the mazy streets of Boston. In half an hour he was back inside the Lifter truck, tucking into a massive meal. A gay banner across the crowded, bustling room read HARVEST FEST. Churchill and Barb were everywhere, Churchill singing all the while, heavy into his reggae.

When Bengt awoke from his first postprandial nap, he waddled over to the kitchen counter and asked Barb to set him up again. And again. And again.

The sand dab had begun to stink like low tide in the Gowanus Canal. During the afternoon-long vidding of the tutorial, the hot umbrella lights had reduced the fish to the consistency of cow snot. Cammy's thoughts ran, not for the first nor the last time, down a familiar groove: how nice life must've been, back in the old, stable, pre-postmodern, un-fucked-up economy, where you punched a clock and got a weekly check for forty years of eight-hour days, two weeks of vacation every year, then a good pension. But no, she and her peers had been born into the zero-security, free entrepreneurial age of the Endless Hustle.

She wondered if the pro-tech cheerleader type bloggers ever had to confront a gloppy mound of fish guts in their daily rounds? Probably not. Would she ever reach such exalted heights? It seemed so improbable most days. Little Camila Delgado, CEO, CFO, COO. Forbes 400. Not gonna hold her breath! But at least she had her Big Papi Bengt, lovable whackjob, and they had a roof over their heads and food on the table—

Bengt? Food? Where was he anyhow? Getting dark, no call, no text. Could he have gone back to the Lifter truck on his own—summoned by the esoteric forces who'd made his ear tag, drawn in like a deer to a poisoned salt lick, a tiger to a steak-baited blind, a fly to perfumed flypaper?

Hastily shutting down her gear, Cammy whipped off a text to Bengt. Still no response. She tried a voice call. Nada. Her nerves started to thrum, like telephone pole guy-wires under hurricane assault. What appeals for help did Bengt's silence leave? Olala!

"Yeah, sure, he was here, Cam. Left hours ago. I hope he remembers to turn shedder."

"Shedder?"

"Like a soft-shelled lobster. So he can squeeze out of the Lifter truck. It's basically a giant lobster trap. They fatten us up and when we can't get out, they ship us away."

"Don't be so stoned and crazy, Olala. Help me find my husband."

"*Seguro.* I'll give you an app to find the Lifter truck, *porque no?* I gave the same app to your *hombre.* Be sure and shoot a lot of video."

Olala's use of Spanish was a habit he fell into when talking to Cammy. Normally she didn't mind it, but now it pissed her off. "*Pendejo!* You deliberately sent Bengt into a death trap?"

"Sorry, ligand. Between a man and his destiny, I interpose my carcass not. No apologies, no blame. You want my search warez? Hold the phone for a squirt of jah-juice!"

Out on the streets, Cammy turned on Olala's app—but it seemed balky, pre-beta, of no value. The only visible effect was that it changed Cammy's service provider to Wiggleweb. Early adopters get the shaft!

Shaft? She saw a sudden mental image of Bengt on a skewer running up his butt and out his mouth, her husband roasting on the spit, his skin crackling, his rendered fat dribbling into a trough of seaweed layered over steamer clams, the trough wedged between granite stones amid a seaside fire whose flames had already blackened Bengt's face and singed away his hair. His blank, boiled-solid eyes were milky white, and sinister reggae music was playing and—*No!*

Something within Cammy rose up to replace Olala's seemingly useless app. A heartlink to Bengt, a gutlink to the living Lifter dessert pudding, a global positioning system using old-school *biological* cells. At every turning, Cammy followed her instinctual twitches and tics, her heart tugs and her intestinal rumblings.

Seven-thirty PM. Streetlights—those that remained unbroken on this mingy, deserted avenue—blipping on in automatic response to daylight's demise. And there, a block away, the Lifter truck! Hulking like something awkward and out of its native element—like a boxy stranded submarine or a downed suburb of the flying city of Laputa—the truck radiated a sexy/dangerous vibe. Its edges were smooth and gently curved, its cab was sleek and wind-faired. Cammy videoed it. Somehow the truck reminded her of a love-robot Sorayama gynoid pinup calendar that Bengt and his friends had greatly admired. Boyish Bengt and his little needs.

Quietly Cammy felt along the trailer for a glossy chrome entrance rectangle that would revolve like the pivoting haunted-house bookshelves of many an *Abbott and Costello Meet Karloff* epic. But today the seamless exterior of the truck stymied her efforts.

Apparently Lifter was accepting no new patrons tonight. Full complement of overstuffed, duck-and-plum-sated victims? No spare room in the giant chrome lobster trap? Cargo hold full! And *cargo* implied a destination, mind you, a place to deliver the goods. Departure imminent, full speed to the abattoir!

Cammy wasn't about to let her Bengt be salted away. She had to add herself to the haul and rescue her temptation-trapped mate. But even now she didn't dare pound on the truck's side. She feared—who knew what from these creeps? Savage automated tridents and weighted Roman gladiator nets?

She scampered to the shiny truck cab at the front of the trailer. It was a Freightliner Century model, a thousand like it seen every day on freeways, anonymous, no painted name or logo, albeit this one had oddly sensual curves. It was a luxe sleeper model, featuring a berth behind the driver's seat. Hardly daring to hope, Cammy tested the passenger-side door.

Unlocked! In she tumbled, panting from fear more than from exertion. She scrambled through the gap between the seats to the blanket-heaped mattress in back, and drew the stained cloth curtain to shut her off from sight. The curtain's ringlets rattling seemed terribly loud. But no voice cried out.

This back part of the cabin smelled funky, but not with a pong she recognized. Zombie sweat, skin from odd hides, farts of strange esters. Cammy captured some video.

And now her hand found a heavy wrench on the floor. She clutched it greedily, like a cannibal with a thighbone full of juicy marrow. Time seemed to stretch like a wad of Silly Putty bearing the impression of a photo, distorting the portrait of reality as it lengthened.

She heard a wild hubbub from within the Lifter trailer behind her. Footsteps hitting the pavement, two or three people escaping. Little Barb's voice yelling after them, "You'll be back, you greedy skinny sons of bitch!" Was Bengt running with them?

No time to check, for now she heard the truck cab's door opening, with huffing fat man sounds. Churchill Breakspeare? Tuneful humming—of "You Can Get It If You Really Want."

Churchill's hands beat out breaks on the truck's dash, the motor roared to life, and they moved off, Barb calling a farewell from the sidewalk.

They rolled slowly through city streets, no direction evident to cloistered Cammy. Then faster, evidently picking up the interstate. Half an hour's steady travel thereafter, before pulling off. Cammy tried to imagine a circle of likely destinations surrounding the city, but came up uncertain, there being no known facility with the sign she was imagining: *Human Feedlot And Meatpacking Center.*

Churchill Breakspeare exited the cab, still humming Marley's "Buffalo Soldier." Cammy waited a few seconds, then crept cautiously out. Inhabiting the musty bunk had left her feeling unclean. Through the truck cab's windows, she had a panoramic view of an abandoned airfield, ringed by a chain link fence and lit by scattered security lights on tall stanchions. Now she knew where she was: a small regional airstrip, formerly used mostly by amateur pilots and an airfreight company or two. It had gone bust with the bad economy. Was Lifter going to fly their human catch out of the country? Was Bengt really inside the trailer?

Cammy heard Churchill fussing with the truck's hitch, decoupling cables and such. If she exited to ground level, she'd surely be spotted. But if she could clamber above—

Cammy tucked the wrench into her waistband, slithered out the passenger side window, then up and onto the broad roof of the truck's cab. Flattened there, she spied on Churchill.

The heavyset entertainer had entirely freed the diner from its conveyance. He'd opened a hidden panel on the diner's side and was tapping various buttons in a rapid sequence. As he worked, he sang the Clash's "Armaggedon Time." No supper for some of us tonight.

On the flat roof of the silver diner, growing like mushrooms after a rain, a host of rods and antennae sprang forth—orbs and dishes, vents and baffles, vanes and widgets. Cammy videoed them. The newly sprouted equipment began to buzz and hum. The diner itself began to quiver.

Blurry howls from within, like the sounds of damned souls, and—yes—she could hear poor Bengt among them.

All four of the diner's wheels lifted, slowly but perceptibly, off the airstrip's cracked tarmac!

Without any thought or consideration, Cammy got her feet under her and sprang across the narrow, bi-level gap and onto the diner roof, quickly flattening herself there.

Churchill may or may not have heard her thump. But it was too late to do anything. The launch sequence was well underway. A glowing transparent nimbus snapped into being, enclosing the whole diner, and Cammy with it. Luckily it had formed a few inches above her head—failing to bisect her skull. Anxiously she put out her hand to feel the shining surface. It was a solid shell.

Accelerating upward, the diner headed for the sky—

—and slowed to a stop an hour later, approaching a silvery spaceship the shape of a vast disk, nearly the size of a city. Not so far below, sweet Earth gleamed like a noctilucent sea creature—Cammy could almost feel Gaia breathing. She got out her phone and captured more video. How many signal bars did low-Earth-orbit offer? Five! But only to the Wiggleweb! For a moment she forgot her worries, losing herself in the craft of her camera work. But then a pang hit her as she remembered her quiet, idle evenings at home with Bengt. Her mission was to bring that life back.

A door opened in the side of the mothership, and the diner drifted in, drawn by a tractor beam. The door closed, air hissed in, and the glassy shell around the diner dissolved. Artificial gravity reigned. Cammy slithered to the floor, awaiting an opportunity.

The lock's inner door opened to reveal—giant ants? Three-eyed lizards? Flying jellyfish? No, the ship was staffed by Cammy's fellow humans. Quislings, sell-outs, opportunistic traitors to their race. They were dressed in identical brown coveralls, the men and the women alike. And they wore those glittery fluffy cobbled-together *bricoleur*-type necklaces like Churchill and Barb. Like a death squad tricked out in aloha leis.

Cammy crouched beneath the trailer, clutching her wrench. And soon her moment

came. The workers had opened the back of the Lifter van, and were herding out the wobbly captives—Cammy heard Bengt's voice again, raised as if in a querulous question. But he couldn't properly form his words. Peering through beneath the underside of the diner, she recognized Bengt's beige French designer jeans, swollen like the conical legs of the Michelin man. She videoed the legs.

At this point her plan was simple—to club down the first worker who ventured near her, to put on the worker's coveralls, to stash the unconscious victim inside the van, and to pose as one of the staff. But this was not to be. A slim, reedy-voiced man came upon Cammy from behind and seized her arms in an iron grip.

"Looky here! We got us a stowaway!"

"Too thin for the meat line," said a stern, muscular woman, trotting over. "But we can't send her back. Lock her in a cell, Earl, and we'll decide later. Maybe just take her yubba vine and pitch the rest." The rangy woman peered into Cammy's face. Her eyes had a hard, fanatical glitter. "What was your angle, kiddo? Lose a guy to our catch?"

"No, no," said Cammy. "I, I don't know what happened. I was drunk, and I fell asleep on the top of your truck and—where are we? Is this a garage?"

"That's some weak shit," said reedy-voiced Earl. "Especially with you clutching a wrench to clobber us and all."

"I'm scared!" protested Cammy, and broke into sobs. "Please don't kill me. Maybe I could be one of you? I have nowhere else to go. I'm all alone, you see. No relatives, no friends."

"She's quick with the bullshit," said the tough woman. "I like that. But lock her up for now, Earl. I gotta get to work."

"Okay, Nelda."

Holding Cammy's arms in a painful twist grip, Earl marched her inside the ship. A hellish place, like a level of Dante's Inferno. The ship's domed interior was a great, misty space, like a dimly lit underground city, with the edges fading into the distance.

As she was dragged along, Cammy noticed workstations and clusters of mad activity, with pod-like cubicles here and there. In her time, schoolchildren no longer went on slaughterhouse tours, but she'd seen exposé videos of those bleak and bustling spaces—not unlike this one, with the worst parts off in the distance.

The processing of the latest Lifter load had already begun. To make it the more diabolical, the puffed-up victims were still alive, albeit mumbling and stunned.

The captives were lined up by an oversized operating table, and Nelda, the stringy woman, was leaning over it with a glowing knife. Monomolecular fractal blade. Zen carver with the subtle stiletto. Vorpal!

One by one, the erstwhile Lifter patrons were strapped down, and Nelda leaned over them, quick with her knife as a master butcher. Cammy couldn't quite make out what the woman was doing. Extracting essential entities without mortal harm? But mortal harm aplenty awaited! After the table, the human cattle were yanked up into the air by their heels and sent slowly gliding across the ship's roof, diminishing toward a distant, barely visible nexus of assuredly deadly blades. Poor Bengt was already in transit thither, passive as a pupa.

And now Earl was shoving Cammy into one of those rounded huts. The fat door plumped shut, leaving no sign of a seam around its edges. Cammy was trapped like a seed in a pod. What might she grow into?

But all she could really picture was Bengt's excruciation. He'd already suffered some kind of psychic surgery beneath the Vorpal Blade, and now he was swaying toward a more carnal demise. Grade A chops and flank steak. Her husband's childlike greed and naïveté had ruined his life and hers. If only she could have tweaked his personality somehow, willed away all his weaknesses, instilled some spine. But standard marital operating protocols stretched only so far.

Cammy's phone rang! Wiggleweb connection! She fumbled it out, dropped it harmlessly on the resilient floor, then got it up to her ear.

"*Hola, chica!* Olala *aqui!* Gonna get you out of there. Sorry for the unforeseen glitch. Unscripted's okay, but sometimes *muy* fubar. Thought you'd be way more Sigourney Weaver with that wrench. Plot stalled with our star in the hoosegow. Ratings taking an instant dip. No good for the bottom line. Renewal options off the table! But Wiggleweb has plenty of my *compañeros* surreptitiously in place among the Lifter crew. Just sit tight."

"Olala, what are the Lifters extracting before the final slice and dice? What's Bengt going to lose?"

"Oh, that's the yubba vine. Every human's got one. The yubba vine is a hidden organ network of which your Terran medical science knows *nada.* You got your circulatory system, your nervous system, your enteric system, your lymphatic nodes and—your yubba vine. It's your personality's gerbil-wheel, the circle where your mind-spark rushes round and round, making you imagine you've got a continuous self. Like when they stole Majek Wobble's, they got all his mojo plus his toasting talents too. And anyone else can wear someone's vine. Any being, any species. Glitzy, ritzy plug-in plus!"

"Is—is Bengt going to be a zombie if he loses his vine but survives?"

"Not precisely. Just kinda mentally translucent. Less solid and authentic. Insipid. You see lots of such folks around you every day right in Boston. And they still watch TV and pay taxes real fine."

"No!" Cammy began to bang against the pod's rubbery walls, but they absorbed her blows soundlessly.

"Hey, *chica,* calm down! Listen. I gotta book now."

"Wait, tell me what you really are, you *cabrón!* Ratings dip! Terran science! What the fuck is all that!"

But Olala had cut the Wiggleweb signal. No ready answers there.

The undetectable door suddenly manifested itself. Cammy rushed out and instantly collided with what her confused senses initially registered as a kindergarten class on a daytrip. Taking in the scene more coherently, out on the floor of the death arena, she found herself surrounded by a pack of three-foot-tall humans of both genders, all wearing grass skirts, their exposed flesh a gentle green, their black spiky hair like a thicket of quills. Cosmic *Slumberland* imps! Interstellar Wiggleweb elves!

The biggest elf spoke in a *sotto voce basso profundo.* A low, grainy hum. "Quiet down, crazy lady-miss! No big scenes. We say you rogue meat going to ship's tenderizer machine. We say we want pound you like cutlet to correct anorexic skimp. But really, the Big O, he send us get you and hubby-wubby free. Dramatic *Star Wars* escape from trash compactor climax for show!"

"Show! Show! What fucking show!"

"Wiggleweb chart-topper. Terran *Self-Selecting Provender Challenge.* 'Meet the meat so sweet to eat!' 'Irresistible sophont avarice on parade!' 'Trapped by vestigial Darwinian routines!' And likewise mottos. Olala savvy PR flack, and A-number-one producer in four galactic quadrants."

Cammy felt her head might explode. "Okay, never mind. Just get me and Bengt out of this madhouse."

"Walk this way, dudette," softly rumbled the lead elf.

But before Cammy could take a step, she felt hands descend imperatively, one upon each shoulder.

Nelda stood to one side of Cammy, Earl on the other, once again having crept up on Cammy unheard. Not so hard amidst the processing din.

"Now, just where you goin', little miss?" asked Earl.

Nelda squinted menacingly at Cammy. "I doubt your yubba vine is rich and ripe. but I might could harvest it anyhow."

The Wiggleweb elves' leader intervened, all seeming deference and protocol. "Big-time orders from Chief Snickersnack! Pound the sinews of this one for refectory diet jerky! Look, we open portal straight to ship's kitchen!"

A disc of floor evanesced, revealing a shimmering gateway. Through the moiré scrim, a scene could be dimly apprehended.

Earl bent over to peer into the wormhole. "You sure you done got the right coordinates here? T'other side of this hole don't resemble no tenderizer machine. Looks to me like Prison Bay termination module Number 785, or thereabouts—"

Trusting the goodwill of the Wiggleweb elves, Cammy abruptly shoved Earl through the wormhole. And before Nelda could even shout—a fist to her gut, a leg sweep and a push sent her in Earl's wake.

The floor resumed solidity. The Wiggleweb elves bowed toward Cammy. "Most excellent Linda Hamilton style aggression! Now, the real deal!"

A new short-cut wormhole opened. Englobed like a beloved human herder by a pack of trusty miniature musk oxen vigilant against Lifter wolves, Cammy dropped through. Gravity shifted vectors, and then she was standing half a kilometer away—where Bengt dangled dispiritedly, awaiting the Kafkaesque Penal Colony Rube Goldberg machinery of filleting. He was fourth from the head. So wan and listless were the victims of the yubba-vine extraction process that they hung there as quietly as country hams.

Like macro-amoebas, the pack of Wiggleweb elves merged their substance and flowed a pseudopod around Bengt. They engulfed him, unhooked his heels, and passed him into their center, where Cammy clasped him furiously to herself. His bloated body felt semi-alien, semi-familiar.

"Oh, Bengt, you big idiot doofus glutton!"

Bengt's affect remained bland and flat and sadly diminished. "Sorry, Cammy. I screwed the hot dog, or it screwed me. Guess I'm no Takeru Kobayashi after all."

"Don't worry, B-boy, we're gonna get you home safe and sound. Everything will be super fine!"

"Super fine without my vine? How I pine and do decline. Can't refine the mind offline."

"Oh, shit! Hey, you!" Cammy addressed the general location of the head elf—who was still merged with his posse.

"Not ignorant *hey you!*" came the response. "Papa Palapa, at your rescue."

"Okay, sorry, Papa Palapa. How do I get my man's yubba vine back?"

"Oh, neato mosquito! We go check gift wrap division."

The fused mob of little people, bearing Cammy and Bengt in their metaphoric belly, dropped down another teleportal (Cammy was almost getting to enjoy these rides), and emerged at an assembly line where single-minded workers were packing up fetish-like objects into long circuit-laden homeostatic shipping boxes as big as those that might hold a dozen untrimmed South American roses. Papa Palapa whisper-boomed to Cammy: "I busy up head wrapper man, you check out vines!"

Peeling off from the pack, Papa Palapa engaged the foreman, an officious, vice-presidential candidate type, who soon assembled his team of packers to help respond to Palapa's frenetic, double-talking badinage. The yubba vines were unattended.

Very tentatively, Cammy lowered her forefinger onto one of the gnarly assemblages, a weird welter of cartilage, vertebrae, ectoplasmic tendrils, bits of bone, viscera, ganglia and dendritic microtubules.

As soon as her finger touched the vine, she was blasted with non-self memories of growing up black in Roxbury. She jerked back in surprise. Reluctantly, she began test-

ing all the other exposed specimens, almost overwhelmed by each one's immersive sensory assault. What if Bengt's had already been disguised as a glittery lei for some—

Brown University quad on a hot spring day, tossing a Frisbee, whoa, look at that babe, gotta bone up for Derrida 101, wish I could bone her—

"Bengt! Here you are!"

Her husband lowered his face to within an inch of the funky neuro-anima web. "I think I recognize my pineal gland." He reached down and grabbed the yubba vine. Instantly the old Bengt was back! He draped the soul-chord around his neck like a scarf. And as he donned the vine, it camouflaged its grisly essence beneath a sparkling illusion of crystals, tufts, spangles, and shells. "Cammy, I love you so much! I'd give you my yubba vine if you wanted it."

"It belongs to you."

The pack of Wiggleweb elves, sensing victory, shuffled Bengt and Cammy away from the gift-wrap division. And now the elf-mass subdivided into the former happy throng. Papa Palapa rejoined them.

"Okay, pards! Time now for 'Open the pod bay door, Hal!'"

Cammy felt sure they would be stopped at any minute. But another instant subquantum wormhole jaunt brought them to a collection of small shuttle vessels.

"Can't send you straight to Earth via spaghetti system," Papa Palapa intoned. "Whole planet interdicted. Must use last train to Clarksville." Only then did Cammy really take cognizance of their escape vehicle.

The flying saucer consisted of a shallow chassis approximately as big as a modest hot tub, with side and rear vanes for aerodynamic maneuvering. Half the interior space was occupied by the shielded drive mechanism. A transparent dome rested atop the passenger space. A few failsafe controls clustered around a small steering wheel. Maybe comfortable for Wiggleweb elves, but two humans could barely fit side by side on the padded bench seat, with their legs folded and knees up around their ears.

"This is all you got?"

"Lifter buggers can't be chewers! Hop in!" Papa Palapa raised the dome with a click and a whoosh of hydraulics.

Hopping was not the operative verb. Cammy let Bengt insert his unnatural bulk first, on the passenger side, before cramming herself in behind the wheel. Papa Palapa dropped the dome, which sealed claustrophobically around them with a reassuring thunk.

"Whitney Houston, we have ignition!"

The UFO trundled forward under invisible tractor beams, passed into an airlock, then was squeezed into naked space like a zit exploding.

Freedom!

Except that now they faced an enormous wormhole, big as a cathedral! Sucker-dotted tentacles the size of freight trains spilled from the hole into the raw vacuum, questing for their ship.

A hologram vidscreen on the dashboard flared into life. The 3-D monitor was filled with a writhing nest of saliva-threaded beaks and ciliated mouths, a congeries of rasping tongues and fangs. Cammy felt like puking.

The chaotic organic eating machine bellowed, "Buy one get one free offer still in effect! No rebates! You're in the offer! So get in my shopping cart, you insolent canned goods!"

Against the background of the stars, the wormhole could be seen moving like the oval of a dark anti-searchlight. The tentacles moved ever closer and closer to the small craft with the humans inside.

Cammy shrieked, then grabbed the steering wheel and slammed a button marked

FAST. She made like she was sweet sixteen—behind the wheel of Daddy's Camaro once again, all hot tequila in her veins.

The wormhole stayed on their tail for a time but somehow—after a timeless hell of dodging and near misses—they broke into the clear, perhaps too trivial a prize for more recapture effort to be expended.

Cammy had triumphed. Or was it Olala's behind-the-scene interventions that had achieved the thrilling climax to this episode of *Terran Self-Selecting Provender Challenge?*

As the upper edges of Earth's atmosphere began to heat the nose of their absurdly tiny craft, Olala himself appeared on the hologram display.

"Good going, kids! We're a hit again! Another season assured. And now that you're in the know, I can get loosey goosey with you. What a relief!"

Olala reached up to grip his hair and pulled off his prosthetic human disguise.

Pointing up directly from the fake shoulders of his cyborg exoskeleton sat a squat lobster head, all mandibles and feelers and beady glassy eyes. Cammy was too numb to be shocked or scared.

Bengt crowed, "Boil me scarlet and dip me in butter. Now I know why you steered clear of those annual fraternity clambakes."

"Nah, just too boring. After all, what's a little cannibalism among friends?" ☽

QUOD ERAT DEMONSTRADUM

When I lie awake, the bed sweaty
from a nightmare tussle with Cantorian infinities,
and mathematical artifice sits heavy on my chest,
I gasp for air like an overweight wrestler
with sleep apnea, and dream
of Richard Feynman. In his office at Caltech,
alone, surrounded by dusty tomes,
the dance of sub-atomic particles
chalked on the blackboard
(later airbrushed
on his mustard-yellow Dodge Maxivan),
one hip canted, muscles bunched
like a cluster of neutrons, an arm uplifted
as if to mimic the escape of a photon.
He says, "I can live with doubt . . .
I don't have to have
an answer . . . . don't feel frightened
by not knowing things . . ."
I breathe the mysteries of infinities
and uncertain dawns recede.
Accompanied by imagined voices
of Tuvan throat singers, I
go back to sleep.

—Karin L. Frank

As a USAF officer who volunteered for and was denied a posting in Kuwait during the build-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, Gray Rinehart remains inspired by all those who defended, and are defending, the cause of freedom in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere—and particularly the courage, fortitude, and commitment of those who have borne the brunt of battle. His third story for *Asimov's*, informed partly by observations while serving on temporary duty in Kazakhstan and Russia, asks . . .

WHAT IS A WARRIOR WITHOUT HIS WOUNDS?

Gray Rinehart

Miroslav did not expect to find a colonel waiting for him when he returned from physical therapy. The officer was looking out the window; Miroslav came to sluggish attention, unused to his ill-fitted prosthetic leg.

The stranger turned away from the window and regarded Miroslav's awkward pose. "Please, Captain," he said, his voice heavy though he smiled and nodded, "stand at ease, or sit if you prefer."

Miroslav shifted his single crutch a little, careful not to throw his balance off. He would not sit unless the colonel did so, even though his muscles quivered as if he had just completed a twenty-kilometer forced march.

Would they send a high-ranking officer to discharge him? Any nurse could have delivered the paperwork; it would be less humiliating.

"How is your recovery?" the colonel asked. "Are you receiving adequate treatment? Are you progressing well?"

Miroslav acquiesced to the small talk. "I am stronger," he said. He stood on his own for a second and tapped his false leg with the crutch. As he put the crutch back down, he lifted his prosthetic left arm. "I am not . . . as capable as I once was."

The colonel frowned, as if he preferred not to discuss the reality of Miroslav's amputations. He strode to the hard steel chair and sat, perched on the front edge like a gargoyle leering from the side of a building. He sniffed; a brief look of distaste

crossed his face from the room's antiseptic smell. After that lapse, he regarded Miroslav with the cool concentration of a sniper.

Miroslav shuffled to the bed and, fumbling only once, managed to seat himself. Until two days ago, he had required a nurse's assistance to do even that much. Perhaps this was progress. He supposed if they had given him a better leg, one fitted with sensors and tuned to signals from his brain, and an arm that would support any significant weight, he might at least look more normal. But why waste such things on him when it was easier to muster him out? He knew the Americans built truly modern limbs, good enough to keep the willing wounded in service, but he held out no hope of that.

"Captain Ponomarenko, I am Colonel Lutrov. I am here because your case has attracted high-level attention in the government. I am sure you can guess what sort of attention."

Miroslav was certain he could. His family name had secured him some small notoriety in his early career, and his successes in the ongoing Chechen campaign had earned him more, but having an uncle as a very senior Kremlin official meant that Miroslav endured more jealousy from peers and more entreaties from sycophants than he cared to acknowledge. It also meant that his failure in his most recent skirmish would have attracted the wrong sort of attention.

"Yes, Colonel, I believe I can."

"Good. We would not want to disappoint your powerful friends."

"No," Miroslav said, "of course not."

"Then I am to give you this," Colonel Lutrov said, and pulled a thick brown envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket. He read aloud the white label on the front. "Captain Miroslav Aleksandrovich Ponomarenko, you are ordered to proceed to the Nikita Trubetskoy Military Sub-Academy and present yourself there on 17 June. Report in civilian attire." The colonel stood, stepped to the bed, and offered the envelope to Miroslav.

Dubious, Miroslav took the envelope and read the label himself. He turned it over, ready to open it and read the contents, but the colonel extended a hand as Miroslav saw the bold print over the flap: TO BE OPENED ONLY BY TRUBETSKOY SUB-ACADEMY DIRECTOR.

"What is this?" Miroslav asked, his fatigued muscles tensing like primed explosives ready for a firing signal. "Am I to be a spectacle, to frighten children?"

Colonel Lutrov returned to the chair and sat as alert and observant as before. "I am not at liberty to discuss the details, but I can say that you will observe and interact with the cadets. You went to Trubetskoy, did you not? Surely recent heroes visited you from time to time."

Miroslav sniffed, as much at the title "hero" as at the memory of the dignitaries who visited the school when he was a cadet. Most were old men, perhaps important or even powerful in their own ways, but none of them particularly inspiring.

"I thought you were bringing me discharge papers," he said.

The colonel raised his eyebrows. "Not today. Just orders."

"Ridiculous orders," Miroslav argued. "This is less than a week away."

Colonel Lutrov shrugged. "You said you were getting stronger." When Miroslav did not challenge this statement or ask any more questions, the colonel stood. "I have done my duty here, Captain, so I bid good day to you. I will alert the staff that you will be discharged soon. I am certain your remaining therapy here will be enough to prepare you for your journey. I hope to meet you again, and to hear about your . . . return to your youth."

He left Miroslav turning the envelope over and over, reading each side again and again, and wondering at how far he had fallen.

* * *

Miroslav's stump itched where it met his prosthesis. The itch intensified the longer he stood still, yet he could not make himself move. He should just cross the street and go inside, but doubt and memory kept him rooted to the grimy sidewalk. A coughing, asthmatic panel van lurched down the street. Miroslav resisted the urge to scratch his stump.

He also resisted the urge to return to the Metro station, and from there to the base to ask for discharge papers instead of the strange, sealed envelope he had been given. He must be the subject of some complicated and expensive practical joke. Or worse, an attempt to honor him.

In the absence of further movement on the street, Miroslav studied his destination. He was surprised how much the sub-academy looked exactly as it had when he graduated from it twelve years before. The school dominated the street, its bleak concrete face seeming slightly smaller than he remembered. Three stories high, grey as everything else in the old suburb, its rows of small windows protected with iron grates still reminded him of a prison.

He regarded the rest of the block, and found little to impress him there, either. The apartment complex in front of which he stood was decorated with a mosaic of grim, determined workers in baggy pants laying brick on brick to create more and more of the same dismal apartment buildings that stretched down the street. There the line of uniformity met crumbling shells and rusting skeletons of buildings never completed, where the Socialist ideal encountered the reality of history: with no central authority to direct them, the original crews had gone in search of other opportunities, abandoned projects in place, and left the edge of the city as brown, dingy, and unfulfilled as the once-colorful mosaic.

Miroslav rubbed his tongue over his teeth. Already he felt the grime and soot that covered everything starting to permeate him. The apartment balconies overflowed with junk, as much the detritus of capitalism as were the empty storefronts lining the street on his walk from the station, while the unmowed swath of grass in front of the building spoke of a discipline sorely lacking in the civilian sector.

"I know you," said a voice above him.

An old man, balding and sun-browned, leaned against the railing of one of the balconies. He sucked on his cigarette, grinned, and blew a great plume into the air.

"Is that so?" Miroslav asked. He stepped painfully closer to the building, trying not to use the walking stick they had issued him. He did not venture too close, lest the stink of neglect and piss attach itself to him.

"Who else could you be, but Ponomarenko? We all know you here, in uniform or out." He took another drag off the cigarette. From a radio or television behind him a commentator's voice rose to announce a goal for the World Cup team. He grinned and continued, "You are the hero of Gudermes, the hero of Vedeno. What did they give you after Vedeno? Order of Suvurov?"

Miroslav winced a little at the sound of the names, his vision briefly clouding with blood-tinged remembrances of the Chechen cities. He shook his head. "Order of Kutuzov, Third Class. And Order of Saint George, Fourth Class."

The old man's cigarette was a tiny nub in his stained fingers. "Idiots. There was a time you would have earned the Red Banner."

"And there was a time you would not so casually have called them 'idiots.'" The old man laughed, and nodded, as Miroslav said, "Besides, I'm no hero, only a survivor."

"Only a survivor . . . who has come home." The old man laughed at some private joke, then gestured across the street. "You're going back, then?"

"Perhaps," Miroslav said.

"You go on. Inside, they wait for you. You will do fine. You'll come out a new man." The old man winked, and returned to watching the street.

Miroslav crossed the street toward the ugly front door. He cursed both the cheapness of his new leg and the fact that he had had so little time to learn how to use it properly.

The stairway was wide, the treads slick and uneven in the shoddy Communist crafts tradition. Instead of using the damned cane, he held it in his hand as he pressed against the half-height brick wall, his prosthetic arm held out at an angle in front of him as he limped up the stairs.

The vestibule looked much as it always had: clean and Spartan; white walls broken only by a set of flags, the academy's crest, and the latest portraits of national and military leaders and the school's namesake. He appreciated how much the wood floor shone, having spent many hours polishing it himself when he was a cadet.

He remembered the way to the commandant's office. As he turned in that direction a pretty woman close to his own age, carrying a fancy new digital workspace—he could not tell what model—entered from the hallway. Miroslav hugged his left arm close to himself when he recognized her.

"Nastas'ya?" he asked.

She looked up. "Slava," she said, and beamed at him. Her smile, wide and perfect, was no less bright than her clear blue eyes. She was taller than he remembered, sleek in a white blouse and indigo skirt; her hair was more brown now than blonde, but she was still Anastasiya Kozyreva. "It has been too long," she said, and stopped, her eyes wider as the fullness of her words came to her.

She looked down at her feet, aware as he was why it had been so long but also why, if Miroslav had controlled events, it would have been even longer.

He had brought her brother's body home, had stood heart hammering and head pounding with her and her parents at the funeral. He had returned to his unit the next day. Once, when they were younger, he had talked of marrying his best friend's little sister, but when he failed to bring Pasha home alive he buried that boyhood fantasy with his friend.

"I am sorry, Nastas'ya," Miroslav said.

She sniffed. Her fingers danced over the surface of her portable workstation in a graceful pattern that meant nothing to Miroslav. "As am I, Slava. But I think you did not expect to see me. Come, Mr. Berezovsky is anxious to meet with you."

Her face and voice in tight control, Anastasiya led him into the anteroom of the commandant's office. She announced him and held the door for him to enter. Miroslav tried to meet her eyes again, but failed.

"Thank you, Miss Kozyreva, that will be all. Captain Ponomarenko, so good to see you. I am Jurek Mikhailovich Berezovsky, the academy, uh, administrator."

Berezovsky was much younger than Miroslav had expected. When he had gone to the Academy, the commandant had been Colonel Lenka Grigorivich Arsov, a decorated old soldier with ten tales of courageous action for each medal on his uniform. Arsov had been a gruff, self-important man to whom the military aspect of training was never tough enough, but who had nonetheless treated Miroslav fairly well.

Miroslav wondered if the sub-academy even had the same military air he recalled. Berezovsky did not use the title "commandant," and like Miroslav and Anastasiya the man was in civilian clothes. Had control of the academy, like so much of Mother Russia, been given into the hands of private enterprise? It seemed not from the trappings in the windowless office, including a passable rendering of the Battle of Waterloo that dominated one wall. But Berezovsky seemed too young ever to have worn a uniform.

The pleasantries over, Miroslav sat opposite Berezovsky. The man radiated pride

and contentment from across the desk. "Captain Ponomarenko, I am so glad they sent you to us. You have made this academy very proud."

"You are very kind, Mr. Berezovsky. Of course I owe my success to what I learned here." He looked down at the inert plastic where his left arm had once been. "And, I suppose, my failure to what I forgot."

"Ah, still as modest as ever?" the administrator asked. "Still in the habit of forcing others to accept praise for things that you have done? Do you still take all the blame on yourself when things go wrong, too?"

Berezovsky's tone was much more familiar than Miroslav thought strictly proper. His puzzlement must have shown on his face, because Berezovsky continued, "Your school record was very complete, and we have heard much about your military record to date."

"Thank you," said Miroslav. "If I do share credit more than blame, that, too, must be something I learned here." He paused for a second, wondering suddenly if this habit he had developed was a strength or a flaw in his character, and just as quickly wondering if he was being genuine about it in the first place. Rather than run that mental maze, he said, "Here, I am to give this packet to you." With his good hand, Miroslav reached into his coat and pulled out the sealed brown envelope.

Berezovsky unsealed the package, and retrieved and unsealed an inner envelope as well. From it he pulled a few slim sheets, each bordered in scarlet—a classification marking new to Miroslav. Berezovsky read the orders and nodded in sage understanding. A slow grin formed on his face. "Just as I expected, when I was told to welcome you," he said. "We have a fine group of cadets here now, and I think you'll enjoy getting to know them."

Miroslav did not enjoy getting to know the cadets. Most of them were too timid to ask any questions of the famous Captain Ponomarenko. Some were too timid to look at him, and only one or two met his gaze. Even they, when they looked at his prostheses, blanched.

The cadets' timidity was only one reason Miroslav did not enjoy meeting them. Mainly, he did not enjoy telling the story of his last patrol: the darkness, the sudden action he knew to be a feint, the young lieutenant—also a graduate of this same subacademy—who rushed in when he should have held fast; the call for support, the rebels' probing assaults, and finally the twin, timed charges that blasted first his right leg and then, as he twisted, his left arm. Miroslav knew that most of his recollection was probably inaccurate, just his brain applying order to the disordered events. Even the priests knew, battle was full of noise and confusion and garments rolled in blood.

It added insult to Miroslav's injuries when some of the cadets asked about Lieutenant Rostropovich. They remembered him from his days at Trubetskoy. Miroslav hated explaining that Rostropovich was now a captain and, having sustained only minor injuries despite his bravado, in command of Miroslav's old unit.

Thankfully, the classroom ordeal did not last too long. Berezovsky invited Miroslav to dine with the cadets, and luncheon brought back other memories. The food was the same as always: ordinary, hearty fare, nothing like the exotic foods he had enjoyed when he had been detailed to Iran. After lunch, Berezovsky invited him to observe the cadets at their drill and martial arts.

"I am at your disposal," Miroslav said, feeling as he always did when he was resigned to enduring a briefing or a training course.

The drilling was exactly as he remembered: precise and boring. The sparring seemed more intense than he recalled. It would have been more enjoyable to watch had not Berezovsky continued with a running narrative extolling the virtues or vices

of this or that cadet. "You see that one? Very early he learned the effectiveness of hurting people. We are not sure he would make a good officer, but he is very quick and very strong." "That tall one, he has more of the virtues we seek, more like you when you were a cadet. See how he steps in to defend the smaller cadet, to protect him from being hurt?" "This dark one is very cunning. Watch how he will draw his opponent in, little by little, until—there!—he has him." "That one is not only strong, but has a good sense of what is worth fighting for. He may be ready to be a soldier very soon." To hear Berezovsky tell it, each of the oldest boys, a score of them in all, had something worth considering. And it was evident that the administrator was very proud of the work he was doing to continue turning out good soldiers like the famous but unfortunate Captain Ponomarenko.

"So, which one do you want?"

The question was so strange that Miroslav at first did not realize it was being directed at him. Berezovsky, who had been standing with his arms crossed, now gestured toward the observation window beyond which the cadets were finishing up their sparring. It was evident that he expected Miroslav to select one of the boys he had been talking about. But for what?

Again, Berezovsky proved astute at reading Miroslav's expression. "Did they not tell you truly why you were here?"

"My orders were sealed," Miroslav said. "I presumed this was a last . . . honor they wished to do me. Or a last punishment. An opportunity to pass on my experience before being discharged."

Berezovsky smiled, but his smile was not friendly as much as it was gleeful. "Oh, no, Captain. You are not here to end your service. You are here to begin your career anew."

Berezovsky said no more until he was back in his office. "They really did not tell you what was in your orders?" he asked as he walked to the desk. He withdrew the papers from the drawer in which he had locked them, and shook them for emphasis. "Here, read them for yourself."

The orders were stamped with an authorization strange to Miroslav, but otherwise they began like most of the orders he had received during his career. They had the usual coding and dating and authentication that ensured rear echelon administrative troops—the only ones to whom the gibberish made sense—remained busy behind the lines and never had to venture near bullets or bombs. The instructions directed at the school, however, were so strange that Miroslav read that part three times.

> The special training unit at the Nikita Trubetskoy Military Sub-Academy is directed to assist Captain Ponomarenko by providing opportunity to interact with and observe the senior cadets, for the purpose of selecting a host for the captain's rejuvenation. The selectee must meet all qualifications under the Teryosha program, with all preliminaries completed and ready for early graduation. Target date for initiation is 20 June, with two weeks for assimilation and closeout of familial obligations. Ensure Captain Ponomarenko // Teryosha // reports for refresher training by 7 July.

Attached to this paper was a similar one assigning Miroslav to the Teryosha Project and directing him to follow the Administrator's instructions.

To Miroslav, Teryosha was only a folk tale: the boy carved out of wood, brought to life, who thwarted the witch that wanted to eat him. What that had to do with him, Miroslav could not fathom. Each time he read the words the feeling he had fought while standing across the street, that he was the target of an elaborate joke, grew stronger; it crept into his good hand and he crumpled the paper. "I do not appreciate being made a fool of," he said.

"Captain, this is no joke," Berezovsky said. "You do not realize how high an honor you are being given.

"These boys are usually reserved for high officials, mostly even now the Party faithful—if we still had a Politburo, the members who knew about Teryosha would crawl over each other for a look at the boys who might host their rejuvenation—"

"Stop," said Miroslav, and tossed the papers on Berezovsky's desk. "This is insane. I went to this academy, I was a top graduate. I know nothing of this."

"Of course not. You were not an *early* graduate."

"What does that . . ." Miroslav felt his unspoken question die a quick death. Early graduate? No one graduated early, except—

"Sharova?"

Berezovsky smiled. He looked up at the ceiling, or perhaps at the wall behind Miroslav's head, and said, "Yevgeni Sergeyovich Sharova, yes. He graduated early. That would have been what, perhaps a month before you left for basic training?"

"I don't remember exactly. Something like that. He had been sick. We had a party for him."

"We always do," said Berezovsky. "Did you follow his career after he left here?"

"He went into government service somewhere, but I don't recall."

"He went *back* into the Ministry of Industry and Trade, specifically, fast-tracked for advancement. He might have become the youngest Minister in history, had he not died in a skiing accident in Switzerland." Berezovsky narrowed his eyes at Miroslav, then activated the intercom and said, "Miss Kozyreva, please bring in some water for our guest."

"No, I'm fine—"

"I insist."

The door opened a moment later and Anastasiya entered, carrying a silver tray laden with a bottle of Perrier and two tumblers. Miroslav glanced at her as she put the tray on Berezovsky's desk; he could not bring himself to look her in the eye, but he thought her expression was dark.

Berezovsky poured and handed over a glass while Anastasiya left. When the door closed behind her, he said, "If you are shocked, then I will take credit on behalf of our security arrangements. Very few know the capability exists, and even fewer where it is. As I said, this is a high honor for you . . . you must have powerful friends, or your heroism has attracted the attention of people at the very top. Or both."

Miroslav knew whose attention he had attracted, but questions dominated his thoughts. Unsure what question to ask first, Miroslav gulped some water. He choked a little on the bubbles, and asked, "But, how?"

Berezovsky shrugged. "In this, I am only an operator. I make the process happen, but deeper questions would go to Herr Riemenschneider . . . if he were still alive, of course."

"I don't understand."

"Riemenschneider was a scientist, one among many whom our forces captured and brought back after the Great Patriotic War. He was interested in longevity and other means of . . . improving humanity. He continued his work and, I am happy to say, perfected it before he died."

"Perfected?" Miroslav's voice sounded distant, harsh, despite the water. "Do you mean that . . . that I . . ."

"May choose one of the older boys you saw this afternoon, and you will be given his body."

Miroslav swallowed against the urge to disgorge the lunch he had eaten. He dropped his head, looked at his feet, the floor, the baseboard—

Berezovsky grabbed Miroslav's upper arms; he had come around the desk, and did not shy away from Miroslav's prosthesis. Miroslav looked up as the administrator said, "Think, Captain, think! Your bravery, your experience, gone to waste because of some swine's bomb? How much better for you to go on, whole and hearty and, perhaps best of all, younger?" Berezovsky grinned, tapped Miroslav's prosthetic arm twice, let him go and walked around the room, saying,

"Don't you think the Americans would be doing the same thing, if they could? Or maybe they are—they captured their own scientists, after all. Surely Riemenschneider did not do all his work alone. But think what they would do with it: rich, fat industrialists paying for the privilege of youth, so they can screw young women again and put more of the world in their pockets. Not so for us. We have rejuvenated great leaders, great scientists, great warriors, who can then go on to even greater accomplishments."

Miroslav found his voice. "But, this school, our school. Why here?"

Berezovsky tilted his head, as if wondering if he had heard the question correctly. "Why else do you think this school even exists, except for Teryosha? We aren't like the Americans, with such schools all over the country. Camden, Randolph-Macon, Oak Ridge, all of them dedicated to their twisted idea of liberty in isolation, rather than the security of cooperative service to the people and the state. No, this subacademy is unique and exists for one thing: to prepare young men to give their all for Mother Russia. Some will do so as you have, and some will do so in . . . other ways."

Miroslav drained his glass, and found himself again looking at various spots on the office floor. Finally he said, "I . . . don't know. I need some time to put all this together in my mind."

"Of course," said Berezovsky. "Take the rest of the day, think about what it means for you and for your country. But you saw the orders: the target date is the twentieth. That gives you three days."

Late afternoon sun slanted through the city, and Miroslav limped from sunlight to shadow again and again, registering but not really feeling either the warmth or the coolness. He maneuvered generally in the direction of his mother's apartment, at times homing in on it before veering off again, wanting to seek her counsel but forbidden to, sure she would welcome him but afraid she would read his dilemma in his silent brooding.

He stopped once in front of a great bronze monstrosity on the side of what had been some Party building. Unlike the mosaic across from the academy, this bas-relief had depth, and the sculptor had taken pains with details like rolled-up shirtsleeves and straining muscles, but the workers' paradise subject matter neither impressed nor captivated Miroslav. He moved on when his stump began to itch.

Hunger intruded on his brooding as Miroslav limped past several restaurants, but it was full night before he found what he wanted. For all the historical ties between Russia and Iran, he had trouble finding good Persian food—and he had spent enough time on assignments in Tehran and elsewhere to know what was good. Unfortunately, while the place was suitably dim and the wait staff discreet, the *Dizi* was not as good as it could have been. The vodka, though, was clear and cold and sharp—and that was enough.

Miroslav tried to concentrate on the music in the background, and on the texture

of the flatbread and the taste of the broth, but other thoughts intruded. Pain in his absent left arm reminded him of his first battle wound: a minor piece of shrapnel in his bicep that he had extracted with his teeth to impress his soldiers. His thoughts inevitably led from wound to wound, engagement to engagement, until the last and fateful skirmish that found him trapped and left him broken. He thought of Lieutenant—now Captain—Rostropovich, oblivious to the Chechens' feint as well as to the signs of planted explosives as he charged ahead without authorization, and wondered if the young fool had learned enough that he could really take care of Miroslav's men. And always he felt, in his heart and his arms, Anastasiya's brother Pasha dying so many years before.

The restaurant came back into focus—perhaps a little blurred at the edges—when a slender youth said, "Excuse, please, but my father insisted that I ask you—"

"Yes," said Miroslav in the best command voice he could produce, not wanting to hear the question because he knew what it must be.

"Sir?"

Miroslav swayed. In his eyes the youth became a young boy, then an old man, then a recruit, then a corpse . . . then Pasha. Miroslav threw back another shot of vodka and slammed the glass down on the table. "Yes, I said. Yes. I am, Ponomarenko . . . I was . . . I am what is left of him."

His vision cleared and the youth returned to his table. Miroslav watched him make his report, and did not want to wait for the boy's father's reaction. He could not take another citizen fawning over him, calling him hero . . . he would rather they accost him, condemn him, call him butcher and traitor and coward.

Miroslav groped in his pocket and produced more than enough rubles to cover his bill. He dropped them on the table as he rose—

—and began to fall, his prosthetic leg uncooperative—

—and reached out to steady himself—

—and crashed into the table on top of his prosthetic arm. The waiter rushed over and began to mop up the table, but his noises of obsequious concern were lost in the rush of blood through Miroslav's ears. Patrons at the other tables were either laughing or trying to ignore what they had seen, except for the youth and his father, who both looked unaccountably sad.

Back out in the warm June night Miroslav limped toward his mother's apartment, cursing his failures and his fate. He cursed his leg with every step, his arm every time it swung through a graceless arc. He cursed the army, he cursed his commanders, he cursed the cane he leaned upon. Two streets away from the restaurant he noticed his cheeks were wet with tears, and he cursed his weakness and his rebellious eyes.

His mother's apartment building looked like all the others: square and grey and bleak in the half moonlight. Miroslav levered himself down to sit on the steps. The breeze might have been refreshing had it not carried traces of refuse and old vomit. Somewhere in the night, cats screeched at one another.

Miroslav had sat on these same steps with Anastasiya, over a decade ago, on many nights much fresher than this one. He had held her hand—the thought of her hand in his brought new curses to his mind for the Chechens, for the makers of artificial limbs, and for the stupidly bold lieutenant who cost him his arm and leg. Miroslav did not want to believe that anyone who had come through the same training that he had would ever be as foolish and unheedful as—

Miroslav sat up straighter. He put his day together with his memory and wondered if Lieutenant Rostropovich had been rejuvenated from a previous officer. It might explain the young man's arrogance, his air of righteous entitlement . . . and what Miroslav had thought was simple stupidity might actually be much more dan-

gerous: complete loss of fear. If one is made new, made whole, would that drive out fear?

If I let them do this to me, Miroslav wondered, is that what I will become? Will I still be Slava Ponomarenko?

Despite that misgiving, and despite his disbelief, sitting on the steps in the moonlight Miroslav understood the allure of renewed youth with wholesome, unhindered limbs.

Administrator Berezovsky smiled his wolfish smile. Miroslav decided he did not like the man very much.

"So, Captain Ponomarenko, have you chosen a cadet?"

The administrator's voice drove spikes of pain into Miroslav's head, but he was well-practiced in the art of hiding what the vodka had done to him the night before. He shook his head, despite the pain. "No, Mr. Berezovsky. I am afraid I do not yet understand enough about this . . . Teryosha program."

Berezovsky dropped his smile; his countenance hardened, though he tried to keep his voice light. "What is there to understand? You have been chosen for a great privilege. And, what is more, you have been given clear direction. I do not need to ask if you are still a good *soldier,* still a man who knows how to follow orders. When you choose, we will proceed."

Miroslav bristled at the affront to his honor as an officer. If that was how Berezovsky wanted to play this—

"As you say, I am still under orders. However, my orders give me until the twentieth, which is two days away.

"Let us say, then, that I am unprepared to make a selection because I have been briefed only on the objective. I have not seen any intelligence, nor been given any tactical program to follow. I would be a poor soldier indeed if I marched blindly off a cliff because I did not ask my *superior* for a look at his map."

Berezovsky's eyes seemed to crystallize, and his jaw worked as if he was going to say something. He turned to the wall and regarded the Waterloo painting, and presently said, "What is it you wish?"

"I would like to see the apparatus," Miroslav said. "I would like to become acquainted with it."

"Afraid this might be a ruse?" asked Berezovsky. "An experiment, with you as the rat?"

Miroslav shook his head. "No, merely an elaborate, bad joke at my expense."

Berezovsky led Miroslav into the east wing of the building, one of the legs of the [] the building formed around the courtyard that opened onto the academy's parade field. Midway down the corridor, they entered the infirmary. Miroslav recognized the nurse; she was weathered and worn, and had looked much the same way twelve years ago. He wondered if she had been treating students at the school since it was built. She smiled at him.

"Nurse Godina, Captain Ponomarenko needs something for his headache," Berezovsky said, with a quick look at Miroslav. "Also, he is interested in your version of the tale of Teryosha."

"Of course," the nurse said. She opened a glass-fronted cabinet behind her and extracted a bottle of aspirin. She handed two pills to Miroslav and said, "Come with me, please, Captain."

She led him into the small ward, which smelled of antiseptic and was equipped with two beds and a variety of white-enameled cabinets. Nothing seemed extraordinary; Miroslav associated everything he saw with standard hospital equipment.

Berezovsky sat on one of the crisp white beds, and Nurse Godina grimaced. She pulled a key ring from her pocket, jangling the keys as she found the right one.

"I believe this is what you mean, Captain," she said, and opened the biggest cabinet.

Miroslav was almost disappointed at the items inside: an array of chemical titration equipment, some bottles with bar-coded labels, and a few small electronics. He had envisioned something out of an old mad scientist film, not a hospital room nicer than the last one he had stayed in.

He was growing more convinced that this was not real, but rather than a joke he began to suspect it was a test of some sort. What Berezovsky had said, about an experiment that needed a rat, might not be too far off the mark.

Perhaps his best approach was to play along.

"Which one of you performs the procedure?"

Berezovsky said, "Nurse Godina handles all the preliminaries and monitors progress while I conduct the . . . transfer."

"Are you the only ones?"

"Very few know about the program, because of the . . . sensitive nature of the work. And the transfer takes a deft touch."

Miroslav limped to the cabinet and looked more closely at the items. He saw the nurse stiffen, so he did not try to touch anything. "This looks like a voltmeter, these two things look like GLONASS receivers, and . . . this seems an awful lot of glassware for a very few bottles of chemicals."

"I'm disappointed, Captain," Berezovsky said. "Surely you remember what is on the second floor, above this room?"

Miroslav looked out the window, at the courtyard, and tried to place himself mentally in the room above. After a moment he nodded. "The chemistry classroom and laboratory."

"Yes, we get the additional chemicals from there, when needed."

"If you'll excuse me, Captain," Nurse Godina said, and closed and locked the cabinet.

"I don't understand. What are the chemicals for?"

Berezovsky did not answer. His face registered frustration at Miroslav's questions, as if he knew Miroslav was stalling. In the silence, Nurse Godina said, "Your body is a chemical factory, Captain, and your brain is a complex electro-chemical reactor. The Teryosha process uses chemicals to produce the optimum environment for—"

"Enough," said Berezovsky. "You asked to see the apparatus, and you have now seen it. I do not think seeing it has helped you, but I will ask: are you ready to select one of the cadets? Do you need to see them again?"

"What happens to the child?" Miroslav asked.

"They go to sleep," Berezovsky said, and gestured to Miroslav and the nurse by opening his arms. "And you wake up."

"I wake up . . . is it really me who wakes up?"

"Of course it's you. Your memories, your knowledge, your experience, all intact, but a new body."

Miroslav reached across his chest and touched his left arm where the stump met his prosthesis. "What happens to this one?" He had a sudden fearful vision of being a cadet, young and excited at the prospect of graduating ahead of his classmates, waking up inside a mutilated body such as his. He shivered.

"In your case, buried with full military honors. The autopsy will confirm an aneurysm—difficult to detect, unfortunate." Berezovsky smiled, a chilling grin. "If you like, you can attend your own funeral."

That seemed too much. Miroslav paced, trailing his fingers along the bedrail and

then feeling the thin curtain, which slid in its overhead track. Its chain jingled. Miroslav's head felt as if it were encased in a block of clear plastic; he struggled to think, to come up with relevant questions. "How long does it take?"

"A few hours, with a day, maybe two, to recover and get used to your new body. By the third day you will be running races around the track. After another day to learn about the boy you have become, who unfortunately had to be hospitalized for a sudden illness, you spend a week or two with the boy's family celebrating his—your—early graduation and, in your case, acceptance into special Army training." Berezovsky paused, smiled, and continued, "Think of it as a few days of furlough, some extra leave time, at a camp for actors."

"When did this start? Who pays for it?"

"Captain, I hardly see how a history lesson will help you make your choice."

Always the subject came back around to Miroslav's choice, and now he saw a way to get at the root of the matter, to expose the fraud. "But it has been going on for some time? Officers and dignitaries have been choosing cadets for many years, further back than when I went here?"

"Yes," said Berezovsky.

"Then, why wasn't I chosen?"

Creases appeared in Berezovsky's brow. "Do you mean, why was Sharova chosen instead of you?"

"Yes."

Berezovsky chuckled. "What do you recall about Sharova? How did you compare to him?"

Miroslav pictured his classmate: a bear of a boy, strong and supremely confident. "He was big," Miroslav said, "a great player at everything, but especially wrestling."

"What else? Was he smart, friendly, handsome?"

"Handsome, perhaps . . . not especially friendly. Impatient with many of us."

"Impatient because you were weaker?"

"Perhaps," Miroslav said.

"Then place yourself in the position of the Party official about to be rejuvenated. Would you choose the stronger, or the weaker?"

Miroslav did not answer, and Berezovsky continued, "You were always good, and sometimes the best—but the point was that you, Slava, were always *good*." Miroslav alerted at the administrator's sudden familiarity, but did not interrupt. "Sharova could be a bully at times, but not you. You competed well, and when you came up second you didn't take it out on everyone else like Sharova did—even when he won. No, Sharova was the better choice because you were the better man . . . though I may have said too much."

Miroslav agreed; Berezovsky had said too much. Miroslav's head spun, not from the vodka but from a sudden recognition that shot into his mind the possibility that this insane proposition might be real after all. Reluctant to confirm his suspicions but curious to see if he was correct, Miroslav forced himself to form carefully selected words. "You speak as if you were there," he said.

Berezovsky glanced at Nurse Godina and smiled his wolfen smile. "I was, Ponomarenko. But back then you called me Colonel Arsov."

Miroslav reported to the school on the twentieth of June, soaked by his walk in the rain and ragged from lack of sleep.

"You look terrible, Ponomarenko," said Berezovsky. Miroslav tried not to think of the administrator as his old commandant, Arsov.

"I was up late," Miroslav admitted. "My mother is ill."

"Is that all?"

It was not all. She was ill, but Miroslav did not want to confess the dreams he had endured during his small stretches of sleep. He dreamed he was Sharova, who went to sleep and woke up as someone else. He dreamed he was himself, who slept and woke up as Sharova. He was Pasha, dying, looking up at a stranger's face while the stranger claimed to be Miroslav. He was the wooden boy Teryosha, watching his own mother weep at his funeral.

"It is enough," Miroslav said.

Berezovsky raised his eyebrows, but did not press for more details.

"We have alerted Cadet Ortoff, and he will meet us in the infirmary in half an hour. Do you have any questions before we go?"

Miroslav did not exactly remember who Cadet Ortoff was. He had blurted out the name two days ago to keep Berezovsky from pestering him. The selection seemed to please the administrator, but it did not matter to Miroslav. For the first time in his life—when his career should be over and he was being offered a chance at a new start—he found himself following orders for their own sake alone, and he was not proud of it.

"I do have a question, sir," he said. "In my last unit I had a young lieutenant named Rostropovich who was a graduate of this sub-academy. Was he an . . . early graduate? Was he a Teryosha?"

Berezovsky smiled and nodded. "Yes, in fact. He left the school seven years ago. You must not reveal the truth, of course, but it would not hurt you to know that in his previous military career he had been Major Artemi Voleikov. An adequate officer, but an exemplary politician. Very well connected."

Miroslav wished he himself were not so well connected. "How many . . . Teryoshas are there?"

"I'm afraid the exact number is *very* highly classified."

"Is this the only . . ." Miloslav had trouble thinking of the right word.

"Source?"

"Yes, I suppose. I mean, do other academies participate?"

Berezovsky shook his head. "This is the only one, and access is tightly controlled. Even my secretary does not know the nature of this program.

"Is it not unusual enough, Captain, for a very few, very young men to show such extraordinary potential that they bypass much of the routine preparation for positions of great responsibility? So long as we produce only one, sometimes two, Teryoshas a year, and they are posted far apart from one another in different offices of the government, it *is* unusual but not alarming—and only adds to the sub-academy's prestige. But imagine if the program was to expand, and sudden savants ascended across the country? The upheaval . . . there would be no hope of secrecy after that."

Miroslav sensed a tiny opening. "Perhaps it would be better if I withdrew, then, to leave room for a better candidate."

Berezovsky frowned. "You would toss out your patronage with the rubbish? Unthinkable. Do you think you would prefer to be a wounded veteran instead of a whole and hearty soldier?"

Miroslav shrugged. "What is a warrior without his wounds?" he asked.

Berezovsky stood, his countenance as hard as if it were carved from stone. "Stronger," he said, and gestured for Miroslav to follow him out of the office.

Anastasiya was at her desk, radiant in a bright yellow blouse. "Miss Kozyreva, Captain Ponomarenko has selected Cadet Ortoff for early graduation. We are going to administer his final test. Please see that we are not disturbed."

Anastasiya nodded, but as Berezovsky strode by she looked Miroslav in the eye. Sadness worse than he had seen at Pasha's funeral shadowed her face. She

mouthed, "Don't," and glanced quickly at the administrator to ensure he hadn't seen. She reached out and took Miroslav's good hand, and the blood in his heart suddenly felt hot and thick; she squeezed his hand and shook her head, then released him and turned away.

Miroslav limped down the corridor, leaning hard on his walking stick, wondering how many times Anastasiya had seen officials leave with Berezovsky to administer a test, only to have them die in the process. She was always a smart girl.

She had reached out to him. Had she forgiven him? Or had she never condemned him? Had he done that to himself?

In a few hours the Miroslav she knew would be gone. Would she, could she care for a not-Miroslav, a Slava in a permanent disguise? Could he *be* the same Miroslav in his Teryosha body, or would he be another Rostropovich, a fearless fool who would get others killed? Would he end up with a real boy's body but a wooden heart?

Cadet Ortoff was waiting for them in the infirmary. Berezovsky greeted him with expansive praise, spoke of his exemplary performance and the very special test that would now be administered that, if he passed, would qualify him to graduate early. Berezovsky went on and on, but Miroslav did not listen: he watched the cadet's smile widen, his chest swell. Ortoff had no idea his future was about to be given to Miroslav.

Berezovsky clapped the young man on the back and ushered him into the ward. Miroslav followed, with each step coming to a new decision.

Once through the doorway, Miroslav brought his cane down on Berezovsky's head.

The administrator turned, shock in his eyes, and a quick blow to the temple broke the ferrule off the cane but knocked the administrator out completely.

Cadet Ortoff, after the initial shock, took a step as if to defend Berezovsky. Miroslav put the broken tip of his cane in the cadet's chest, and said, "By my authority as an officer, you will say nothing of this. Do you understand? I have just saved your life."

It was clear that Cadet Ortoff did not understand, but also that he would not defy this mad captain. Miroslav called through the open doorway, "Nurse Godina! I need you."

The old nurse bustled in from the anteroom and stopped short, surprise switching in an instant to professional detachment as she hurried to Berezovsky's side. "What have you done?" she asked as she checked his carotid pulse.

"Ortoff, help the nurse." Miroslav pointed at the bed with his cane.

"You've hurt him badly," Godina said.

"I don't understand," Cadet Ortoff said as he lifted the administrator up onto the bed. "What are you doing?"

"It is not your place to understand, cadet! You will neither understand nor remember. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Then you are dismissed."

As the young man left, Nurse Godina turned slowly to face Miroslav. "What are you going to do, Captain Ponomarenko?"

Miroslav did not know; he thought he had gone mad. He had not formulated any plan, and was operating blind; he had no wish to press on, but could not bear to have this unnatural charade continue. Berezovsky would have to be removed—

"You," he said, "are going to prep Berezovsky. Cadet Ortoff will not be graduating early, after all. It is time for the administrator to graduate."

Nurse Godina's eyes widened, then narrowed in suspicion and doubt. Miroslav wondered if anything he might say could convince her to help him. "Haven't there been enough early graduations?" he asked. "And enough over-confident fools, enough

Rostropoviches, as a result?" He raised his fake arm for emphasis, though she could not know the reference. "He will be gone, and as him I will put an end to this."

She glanced down at the administrator. "You always were quick to protect the underdog," she said. "And I didn't like him much back when he was Colonel Arsov.

"But I am not practiced in the procedure. You cannot take his place. If it turns out I cannot do it . . . it will break many promises, made to many powerful people. Who will be left to protect me, if I attempt this and you do not survive?"

Miroslav reached out and touched the nurse's arm. "If that worries you, you will just have to ensure that I survive."

The preparations took less time than Miroslav had imagined. The supplies had already been brought down from the chemistry storeroom; barely five minutes later he lay down on the empty bed.

As the nurse stuck him with the first needle, Miroslav said, "Please tell Nastas'ya that I am sorry."

"Nastas'ya?"

"Anastasiya. Miss Kozyreva."

"Sorry for what?"

"For everything," Miroslav said. And silently he berated himself for the tear he felt slide down his face, into his ear.

"Slava?"

Miroslav opened his eyes, but the light was too bright so he closed them again. Nastas'ya's voice sounded the same, which surprised him. Miroslav had expected Berezovsky's senses to be different . . . that he would hear things in slightly different registers, or perhaps perceive colors in new ways. It pleased him that Nastas'ya sounded as she always had. He smiled, and squeezed his fists tight.

His right hand closed around Nastas'ya's. The realization took his breath for a second, then he registered the fact of having two fists.

Miroslav opened and closed the fingers of his left hand twice more just to enjoy the sheer sensation of it. He opened his eyes again, a little at first and then enough to see the room around him. Nastas'ya sat on a chair to his right, holding his hand. She smiled at him, a little sadly.

Miroslav lifted his left arm to look at it, and it was his same prosthetic limb.

It moved in its usual clumsy fashion, barely following the path his brain directed for it—but it had just felt so *real*. My own mind turned against me, he said to himself. He said aloud, "It didn't work."

"No, Slava," said Anastasiya. "Nurse Godina said the administrator's . . . injury . . . was too severe. He . . . it killed him, Slava."

Miroslav's chest tightened, and he seized Anastasiya's hand as if to reassure himself that she was really there. Only after a moment did he realize that she was crying. Afraid she would pull away, he put his hand on her cheek and brushed away her tears with his thumb.

She covered his hand with her own, closed her eyes, and smiled.

A second later she looked at him again and asked, "What are you going to do, Slava?" When he did not answer right away, she said, her voice low and her eyes downcast. "Nurse Godina asked if she should summon Cadet Ortoff back."

"No," he said, and held Anastasiya's hand again. "Not that. Never that."

He levered himself into a sitting position, grateful that Anastasiya helped. The bed next to his was draped with a clean white sheet, covering Berezovsky. Miroslav thought of looking down at his own body on the bed, and decided that it was better this way: he likely would have found being Berezovsky unbearable. He would go on as Miroslav; broken, but whole.

Though he would have to pay for his crime.

He stood, and called the nurse. Anastasiya put his shortened cane in his hand and he leaned upon it as best he could.

Miroslav recognized the resignation in Nurse Godina's face; it was the same expression his men had worn when they expected to hear their leave had been canceled, or they had been tapped for another dangerous patrol, or a comrade had died.

"What do we do now, Captain Ponomarenko?"

Miroslav reached for Anastasiya's hand, and grasped it with three fingers while still leaning on the cane. He felt stronger in that moment, from that touch, than he had in months.

"If you would, please contact the authorities and report Mr. Berezovsky's murder." Anastasiya made as if to speak, but Miroslav squeezed her hand so she would remain silent. "I am both recognizable and rather slower than I once was, so I will not flee. Nor will I resist.

"I will swear that you went to great lengths to revive the administrator, and are to be commended. I am certain they will want to speak to Cadet Ortoff as well, who will be able to corroborate the crime."

"No, Slava," Anastasiya said.

"Yes, Nastas'ya. Someone must be held responsible—the greater powers will demand it. And who else but me? It must be so." He raised his false arm, and managed a weak chuckle. "*I* must be so."

Anastasiya pulled Miroslav's arm up and stepped in close to him. She pressed her eyes, heavy with warm tears, against his neck. "Please, Slava, do not leave me again."

Miroslav's heart drummed, wild and strong, and he felt as if the vibrations of it breaking might collapse him. Anastasiya—priceless, fragile Anastasiya—clung to him, and he silently cursed his damnable sense of duty. Feeling as if his very touch might damage her, he brushed his lips against her ear.

"I am sorry, Nastas'ya. Again, and always, I am sorry that you are the victim of all the good I try to do."

She did not look up at him, and spoke so softly he barely heard her. "Will you come back to me?"

Miroslav trembled. Precious Nastas'ya. Even the thought of her was more than he deserved, and he hesitated between truth and hope. He doubted he would ever be released, but even a false hope was still a hope.

"I will," he said. "If you will have me, I will come back to you, somehow, some day. And never leave." ❍

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David J. Schwartz is the author of the Nebula-nominated novel *Superpowers* and the ongoing e-serial *Gooseberry Bluff Community College of Magic.* His short fiction has appeared in numerous venues, including *The Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology *Paper Cities*. David lives in St. Paul, Minnesota. His first story for *Asimov's* poignantly explores life after an alien invasion and asks whether it will ever be safe to trust . . .

TODAY'S FRIENDS

David J. Schwartz

Silent engines and generators are one thing; what gets me are the birds. When the Grays first got here they couldn't leave the birds alone; they were always reaching into their tiny brains, winding them up so tight that all they could do was sing their songs. Sometimes the birds' hearts would stop before they could even let out a chirp. Now the birds stay well away from the cities, and the streets are always quiet.

The day it happened was a workday; I was on my way to the office. I filed out of the building and lined up on the platform with my neighbors, a pace from the person on either side. It was too quiet, and I couldn't keep still. I took out my iBerry and started some e-correspondence—not exactly meditative, I know, but it's not like I'm the only one who does it. Before the Grays, I used to start conversations with people on the train, people I didn't know and would never see again. My mother used to say that my brain didn't work unless my mouth was moving; nowadays a keyboard is the next best thing.

I typed out quick responses, just acknowledgements, most of them, nothing effusive. Then there was an email from my boss asking me to bring him up to speed on the Negative Space project, and that was something I couldn't sum up in a couple of sentences. Negative Space was going to be our biggest contract in years, a habitat for the Grays, something completely of my own design. It was what got me up in the mornings. My thumbs started twiddling over the keys, and after a minute I noticed that the woman standing next to me was staring.

"Mornings Are for Meditation" and all that, so I didn't look back, but I could feel her: eyes like drills into my skull. I've got the silent iBerry—everybody does, these days—so I didn't think I could be bothering her that much. Probably she just hadn't had her coffee yet. But the longer it went on, the more pissed off I got. I couldn't enjoy my email with her staring at me like that. So I cut it short, sent it, and slipped the iBerry back into its holster. When I turned to glare at her I realized two things simultaneously: one, a few spaces beyond her was a Gray, staring at me over the heads of the other commuters; and two, I'd been humming the entire time.

I stopped immediately, and the train whispered onto the platform a few seconds later. I scurried on board and took a seat at the end of the car, hoping everyone would forget my face and I'd just be a whispered anecdote at their workplaces. But the Gray got on the same car, and after everyone was seated and the train started to move, it stood and began the ritual of approach—a series of gangly bows and boneless waves. I really didn't have any choice but to stand, lift my arms up over my head like I was signaling a field goal, and bow welcome.

When a Gray talks you don't hear anything—you see the messages in your mind. In my case—and as I understand it, this is true of most people who work with computers—I saw a blue screen with block text on it.

TODAY'S FRIEND WISHES TO KNOW WHAT IS YOUR SONG? it read. It was gone almost before I saw it. The question froze me. I didn't know the song, not really. It was a pop tune, pre-Landing (obviously), and I couldn't remember most of the lyrics, let alone the title. My brain was like an engine that wouldn't catch.

TODAY'S FRIEND ASKED YOU A QUESTION.

None of them have names. They are all pale, hairless, big-eyed; you can't even tell them apart except by height. It's always "Today's Friend" when they talk to anyone. This one could have been their Supreme Emperor, for all I knew.

Nobody on the train made a sound. I didn't know if the Gray was broadcasting to them—probably not, considering that all it wanted was a song—but none of them looked at us. I wouldn't have, in their place. I wonder if we do that because of them, or because of us.

I shook my head. I couldn't remember the damn song. I shut my eyes, because I knew what came next.

TODAY'S FRIEND WILL HELP YOU REMEMBER.

Invisible fingers touched my brain, casting about for memories. My eyes burned with the smell of smoke; the roof of my mouth tickled; I broke into a sweat. I was wading in sense-memories, as if they had been piled up on the other side of a locked door and the Gray had just broken it down. Since then the door sometimes swings open of its own accord, and suddenly I'm tasting a chocolate chip cookie, burned black on the bottom; scratching a cat's belly until it calmly bites the fleshy webbing between my thumb and forefinger; watching from my office window as saucers descend out of the clouds.

The Gray's fingers found the memories they wanted, attached a few invisible strings, and pulled.

There's a long list of things that the Grays don't like, but for some reason music isn't one of them. I don't think they *like* it, exactly; but they are fascinated by it. I saw a busker once, in the early days, perform "Sittin' On the Dock of the Bay" fourteen times in a row, and not by choice—there were half a dozen Grays lined up in front of him, taking turns pulling his strings. You don't see buskers anymore. Like the birds, musicians have learned to stay off the streets.

The mercy of what happened next was that I was barely there for it. I was remembering a movie that used the song in its soundtrack; I was driving to Racine, hearing a snippet of it on the radio; but mostly I was at my sister's place, watching the Super Bowl halftime show, seeing the pop starlet whose name I still don't remember lip-synching across the stage. I was only dimly aware of my voice matching hers, my falsetto almost tuneful. Some images, some sensations, slipped through: the burn of my calves as I danced up and down the car. Running my hand, fingers splayed, over the cheek of a man about my age. He'd missed a spot shaving, and he reeked of cologne. My hands were sticky from crawling along the floor of the train. The man's eyes were shut, and he looked like he wanted to scream.

When I came out of it I was crouched on the floor, hands in front, back arched, one

leg curled underneath, the other stretched out to the side. Tracked-in grit dug into my palms; sweat poured down my face.

TODAY'S FRIEND WOULD LIKE TO HEAR YOUR SONG AGAIN.

I did the performance three times before the Gray let me out at my stop. About a dozen people got off with me. None of them looked at me; none of them laughed. One woman was crying. Someone must have texted emergency services, though, because the paramedics were waiting for me at street level.

My memories were still scrambled, and I kept sliding back in time to things that had happened years before. I remember sitting in the ambulance being pissed off that they wouldn't tell me whether my car was totaled. I was back on that trip to Racine. I was feeling cold fingers in my brain.

When I woke up I was strapped to a bed in a white room. Whatever they had sedated me with was still working; I wasn't all that concerned about the fact that I couldn't move, or about anything, really. After a while a doctor came in and sat next to the bed.

"We can talk in here," she said. "The room is soundproofed."

Her eyes were small and blue; her scalp was shaved, but shaded with stubble. I was fascinated by this small act of nonconformity. When I didn't say anything, she cleared her throat.

She glanced at her clipboard. "I understand you're an architect."

"I am?"

"Do you know where you are?" At my expression she frowned. "Let me ask you something else. What day is it?"

"It's Super Bowl Sunday."

"And how did you end up here?"

"A car pulled out in front of me, and I swerved."

She stared at me like she was waiting for me to realize something; then she turned to her clipboard and wrote something down.

"Where were you headed?"

"To my sister's house."

"Had the game started yet?"

"No."

"What was the score?"

"Fourteen to three."

She gave me that look again. "I'm going to tell you a story," she said.

"Can you take off these restraints?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"I just thought I'd ask."

"Your condition is not uncommon," she said. "We're so alien to the Grays that they don't really think of us as intelligent, so they have no qualms about reaching into our brains like they do. The experience tends to produce a temporary disorientation, but we find that story therapy can help to clarify things for the patient."

"I'm not disoriented."

"That's fine," she said. "Do you mind listening to a story anyway?"

"I guess not."

The doctor didn't speak right away. I think now that she was making the decision to go off script. I'm sure the clinic had sanctioned stories for the sort of therapy she was about to perform, stories carefully written and edited by committees of psychologists. What she ended up telling me was something more personal.

"Six months ago," the doctor told me, "the director of this clinic disappeared. He went out for a lunch meeting and just never came back. He was an extrovert—most

people are—and it had been tough for him since the Grays landed. We had staff workshops, to try and help each other adjust to the new social norms, but Bill had more trouble than the rest of us. Being gregarious wasn't something he did, it was something he *was*. He used to announce himself when he entered a room, by talking loudly to someone he was with, shouting hello to someone else, even sneezing.

"Maybe he sounds obnoxious to you, but he was well liked. In fact I have to confess that Bill and I had an affair. At least, for him it was an affair; he was married, and I wasn't. At the time I couldn't explain why I was doing it, even to myself, and I ended up breaking it off nearly a year ago. Now I think that it was a very basic, almost animal impulse; Bill hadn't changed, hadn't stifled himself. The rest of us, once we realized that the Grays could and would dismantle our brains as easily as they did our weapons, we put our heads down and kept our mouths shut. Bill didn't do that. If a Gray asked him to repeat something or show him something, Bill just did it. Once a group of us was out to dinner and Bill did a little shuffle-step when our table was ready. When a Gray asked him about it, he did a full tap routine that he remembered from college. I remember I wanted to applaud, but I didn't dare to. No one did.

"The day that Bill disappeared we know he went to his lunch. We know he was lively there, but there were no Grays so there were no real problems. Then he left to walk back to the office, but he never arrived. Everyone assumed that he'd had a few drinks and decided to call it a half-day.

"That night I had a dream about Bill. He was in a Gray hive, having his voicebox replaced with a thought-caster. He wasn't in any pain, but he was crying. The next day, one of my colleagues confided to me that he'd had the same nightmare. I didn't tell him about mine. But no one has seen Bill since then. Maybe they took him; I used to think those stories were just paranoia, but I'm less sure of that now. On the other hand, maybe he was depressed and threw himself in the river. Either way, he's gone.

"About a week after that happened I went home and found a Gray in my apartment. It was standing at the big picture window, looking out. It didn't turn around when I came in, so after my initial shock I quietly changed my clothes and started dinner, hoping it might leave. It just stood by the window while I ate in front of the TV. Mostly I watched the Gray, trying to catch some movement, some sign of a pulse or breath, but it was like a statue, bathed in the albedo of light from downtown.

"After the news I turned off the TV and realized that the Gray had turned to face me. It began the ritual of approach. I'd been dreading this, but what could I do? Fight it? Reason with it? I used to own a gun, but after Wichita I turned it in.

"I had never had a personal encounter with a Gray before, but we all know the protocol, don't we? So I stood and put my arms up and waited with my heart pounding.

"Bill used to say that all Grays walk like they're just learning how to dance, like they're questioning every step they take. I thought of that as the Gray stepped toward me, thought of Bill, and all at once I was overtaken by missing him. I laughed, and almost immediately my laugh turned into hiccups and crying. If the Gray had put out its arms I would have hugged it. Bill used to give such good hugs."

The doctor paused to wipe her eyes and blow her nose.

"What did the Gray do?" I asked.

"It just watched me melt down for a while," she said. "I had my . . . my nose was running, and I had mucous everywhere. I was wailing. It just stood there and stared at me. After a while I started to calm down, and I went into the kitchen to make some tea. When I looked again the Gray was gone."

"It's like they want to watch us suffer," I said.

"I don't think that's it," she said. "I think they really are trying to understand. I don't think any of them has ever felt alone."

"I hate them," I said.

The doctor nodded and made a note. "So do I."

The next day I was released from the clinic. They gave me a prescription for something, but I threw it away with my iBerry, emptied my account from an ATM, and took a train to O'Hare. There I caught a bus to Madison, where I managed to find a ride as far as Baraboo.

There's a sandwich place there where the truckers stop. It used to have a dining area, but it's closed off now. They have a drive-in on one side, walk-up service on the other. I picked out one of the rigs parked outside and waited next to it for the driver to bring his lunch back to the cab. He was older, tall, and looked Asian. Gray stubble covered the top of his head, but his face was hairless.

"Hi. I'm Berto," I said. "I was wondering if you were headed west."

"Taking on hitchers is against company policy," he said.

"Does that mean you won't do it?" I showed him some money. "I can pay."

"Let's talk inside," he said, and unlocked the cab.

I had an uncle who drove a truck, and I rode with him a couple of times, but that was a long time ago. Before the Grays. I remembered the square cab and the noise of the engine. The new rigs had curves like sports cars and never made a sound.

"Fully consistent with all the new regulations the Grays made necessary," the trucker said. "Mostly that means soundproofing; horns and sirens get piped through, but otherwise nothing gets in or out. Even if the engine wasn't a Whisper, we wouldn't be able to hear it."

He pulled a little lunch tray out from behind his seat and set his food on it. He shut his eyes and was silent a moment before he started unwrapping his food.

"Do you believe in God?" he asked.

I took my time answering. "I used to."

"Before the Grays, you mean."

"Pretty much."

He took a bite of his sandwich, chewed it carefully, and swallowed it. "I never did," he said, and took another bite. I waited. "Not until Wichita."

"You were at Wichita?"

His mouth was full, but he nodded. I looked out at the parking lot, at the people eating in their cars and their trucks, keeping a respectful distance from each other. Not a Gray in sight, but they had trained us well.

"I was driving a food services truck at that time," he said after a while, "and I had just made a delivery at the convention center there, where the gun show was taking place. Don't ask me what started it, because I don't know any more than anyone else about that. I just . . . I was pulling away, and I saw it in the rearview, saw the roof just lift off the place. I stopped the truck so I could see what was happening. Things were flying out from under the roof, spinning out in all directions. Some of them fell on my truck. Machine screws, clouds of dark powder, little metal rings. Pieces of firearms and tables and displays, I guess. Disassembled bulletproof vests and unrolled paper cups and ceiling panels peeled back into their constituent layers.

"I was worried about damage to my truck, so I was about to get out of there when I glanced in the rearview and saw people streaming out of the hall. And a Gray appeared in front of them, and they all just . . ."

"Exploded?"

"No," he said. "I know that's what it looked like later, in the pictures. But it was more like when you take apart an engine, or a rifle. Were you ever in the army?"

"No."

"The point is, you can take an M-16 apart and put it back together and it'll still work. You can't do that with a human being."

He put his sandwich down. After a minute he went on. "I saw that, and I threw the truck into gear. But then I looked out, and there was a Gray blocking the road in front of me. Just standing there, arms at its sides, big eyes looking at me and probably a million other things at once. I suppose if I'd been able to connect it to what was happening behind me, I'd have tried to run it down, but my training kicked in, and I stood on the brakes. We learn early on how deadly a rig can be; I used to have nightmares about running people down. Not that a Gray is a person, exactly.

"I stopped, though, and then I thought, 'Now I'm going to die.' There was no way I was going to get the rig moving at any speed before the Gray did whatever it was going to do. I don't carry a weapon in the truck, and considering what was happening in the convention center I thought that was probably a good thing. The only thing I could think to do was to put my hands up, like it was pointing a gun at me, you know?" He laughed. "Which, you know, is pretty much the same as giving them permission to approach you.

"Well, it didn't come any closer, but the words—I saw them in my mind, you know? Just for a second. Looked like a road sign, like 'EAU CLAIRE NEXT 3 EXITS,' but it said 'TODAY'S FRIEND URGES YOU TO LEAVE THIS AREA.' And then it disappeared."

"So you left?"

"I floored it. Drove to Oklahoma City with the radio going crazy, never picked it up. Told my supervisor I'd left before anything strange had happened. Tried not to read about it or listen to conversations about it. Tried to figure out why I wasn't . . . disassembled. Like all those other people."

"Maybe you were just lucky."

"Luck is a word we use for things that aren't worth thinking about too much," the trucker said. "Luck is Bingo. When it comes to life and death, luck doesn't explain anything away."

I shook my head. "It's just that we can't process death, not really. That's why we invented God."

"Maybe," he said. "Or maybe the Grays are God. They're all-powerful, all-knowing. We can't hurt them."

"I think God has to be able to create, not just destroy."

"They're creating something here, something we don't understand. They're changing us. Listen—I'm telling you this because I can see you're running from them. One of them, maybe more than one, was inside your head, and you're looking for someplace where they're not. I've seen it before. But they're God. You can't go anywhere where they can't reach you."

"So you're not going to take me anywhere?"

"I just want to make sure you understand that you can't get away."

"Well," I said, "I'm going to try."

He carefully rewrapped his sandwich and set it in a cooler under his seat, then rolled down his window and shook his tray clean outside. "I'm going as far as Seattle," he said. "I can drop you anywhere between here and there. You got a place in mind?"

"I'll know it when I see it," I said.

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* * *

I took the ride as far as Belvidere, South Dakota. The Grays tend to stick to the cities, so I thought it would be safe to look around and stretch my legs while I decided what to do next. There was a little pizza joint there with a few people sitting together in twos or threes, talking low. I stared at them as I walked in, then sat at the bar behind a beer that the bartender had already poured for me.

"You'll like it," he told me. He was slim and streamlined; long hair pulled back, dark mustache slicked back, crooked nose like the bump on a fighter jet. He had a way of standing behind the bar when idle, his head tipped back on his shoulders, elbows bent, wrists hanging loose. He reminded me of an otter.

The beer was a smooth ale with a nice bite at the finish. "You were right," I told him, and ordered a mushroom slice.

He put the order in on a computer register, the type that used to beep. "I have a sense about these things," he said.

"Beer?"

He nodded. "I know what people are going to order the moment I see them. Someone like you, who's never been here before, I know what you'd like best."

"I guess you develop a sense for that kind of thing if you tend bar for long enough."

"No. I never did. Done this for twelve years, never could even remember what my regulars drank until about three years ago."

"Something just clicked?"

"No." He leaned his fists on the cooler behind the bar. "Tell me something about yourself," he said.

I understood that he was seeking an exchange; he would tell me his story if I told him one about me. I took another sip of the beer, for courage. "I used to be an architect." I said.

"A long time ago?"

"About four days, now." My hand drifted to my waist, where my iBerry should have been. "I was working on this project," I told him. "The firm was hired by the Grays, or by a company owned by a company working for them. They wanted a proposal for a hive design. Terrestrial housing for Grays. There were all these requirements: as little direct sunlight as possible; cool, but without any noisy mechanical ventilation; private, secure, all those things.

"So I had this idea to basically excavate a high-rise out of the ground, right? Dig down thirty or forty stories and build the living space into the walls. Not a new concept, but the idea I had was that we make it narrower at the top. Usually you'd want it wide at the top, let in as much sun as possible, but obviously not in this case. And then I thought why not make it like a tree? Like an oak tree. The outline of one, you understand? I mean they—I don't know that the Grays would see it at all. Maybe no one would, once it was actually built, but it's there in the concept drawings and the blueprints. An enormous oak in bloom, hanging upside down from the surface. It's—we were calling it Negative Space. It was a code name, because obviously there would be other proposals. It was a competition."

I heard how fast I was talking, then, and I stopped. I checked the mirror behind the bar to see if any Grays had come in. None had.

"It was a good idea," I said more slowly. "My boss liked it. I think we might have won the contest." All of that was true, and only four days ago Negative Space had been the most important thing in my life. Part of me wanted that back.

"Will they go ahead and enter it without you?" the bartender asked.

For some reason I was taken aback by the idea. I didn't want to think that the firm was just another hive; I wanted to think that when I left, something was lost.

"Maybe they will," I said.

"You ever met a Gray?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah."

"Ever been inside one of their hives?"

"No."

"I have." He nodded as he said it, as if someone else was speaking. "Three years ago. I used to drink," he said. "I used to drink back here, while I worked. then get serious after close. I was what you call a functional alcoholic.

"So one night I'm out there on the hills, with a bottle and a half of Jack in me. howling at the moon, you know? I was with some friends, but I'd wandered away—I remember thinking how I felt lonely, sitting there by the fire with my friends. so I got up and wandered off. I remember the stars had been out, but at some point it got cloudy, and I was stumbling along in complete darkness. And I fell, or I lay down. on the side of a hill, and the hill opened up and let me inside.

"The inside of the hill was like a fancy hotel lobby. There were plants and fountains and stuff, and there were Grays everywhere. I mean, I was so drunk that I thought *I* was a Gray. They didn't pay any attention to me at first. And then it was like everything froze, and they were all looking at me, and they took me apart."

He picked up a glass, filled it with water from the soda gun, and drank it down in

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one long gulp. A waitress brought my slice to the end of the bar. The soles of the bartender's shoes made a *squick* noise on the mats as he walked over to retrieve it.

The pizza was hot, and the cheese stuck together in a molten mass; I took one bite and had to reel in most of the topping, leaving the crust wounded and half-naked. I gulped at the beer, and managed to cool the cheese but ruin the taste of everything.

"They took you apart," I said once my mouth was clear.

"Yeah," the bartender said, and picked up a cloth to wipe down the bar. "Then they put me back together. The right way. They fixed me. I used to have a bad knee, but it's fine now. I don't limp. I quit drinking and I never even broke a sweat. But I know what other people want to drink."

"I've never heard of them putting someone back together."

The bartender shrugged.

"Did any of them say anything to you?"

"No. They just . . ." He lifted his hands, then dropped them. "They just felt sorry for me. Did you ever break your leg or anything? The way people look at you when you're on crutches, like they're so glad they're not you, but they feel guilty for feeling that way—it was like that."

I ran my tongue across the burns on the roof of my mouth. "What happened afterward?"

"I woke up in my bed at home. Two days had passed. Never found the hive again."

A group of children and parents arrived and took over one end of the pizza parlor. Several tables had been pushed together and covered with white paper tablecloths, balloons tethered to the centerpieces, a party hat on every plate. The children were at first shy, sitting in the too-big chairs kicking their feet, but soon one of them announced that pepperoni was his favorite, and the others joined in. I could see the parents' tension in their restless eyes and pressed lips, but gradually they, too, began to relax, to joke with the children and each other, to laugh.

There were eight small children in the group, perhaps nine or ten years old, but among them there were two who sat quietly beside each other. One wore a party hat and watched the activity at the table through round glasses that were too large for his face; the other held her hat in her lap, perhaps because there was already a pink ribbon woven into her dark braided hair. They observed without participating. Once the girl laughed at something one of the other children did, and the boy looked at her curiously until she was calm again.

I finished my pizza, watching the boy and girl watch the rest of their table. Perhaps there was a Gray or two nearby watching all of us. Was that why these children were the way they were? Was the trucker right? Were the Grays changing us, hunting certain qualities out of us, like tusks out of African elephants? Or were these just the sort of quiet, reserved children who had always been among us, growing up to be quiet, reserved adults?

"What did they do to you?"

"What?"

"The Grays," said the bartender. "What did they do to you?"

I was still thinking about the question when someone came inside and a bird slipped in the door. It was a sparrow, a tiny dusty brown thing, jittery and fragile. It landed on the bar and jerked its head back and forth a few times, chirping. Then it flew up to the ceiling and landed in the wooden rafters there. It trilled its anxiety at the room, and the noise level went up in response, in particular from the kids at the birthday party. The quiet boy and the quiet girl were looking up and laughing with the rest. But I found myself seeing all of them as the bird must see them: inexplicable, indistinguishable, inscrutable—unknowable in every way save the vague sense of potential danger that each of them carried. TODAY'S FRIEND WISHES TO HEAR YOUR SONG. ❍

Three Charms for Recovering Lost Data

I.

You probably deserve this.
You've riled the shit-stirrers,
the grinning spirits that nudge
those things swaying on the cusp of chaos.

Smarter souls would've ducked the evil eye,
bored it with talismans of tidiness:
neat hard drives, documents copied and dated,
protocols held like umbrellas on sunny days.
These shields don't deflect disaster,
but the possibility of it
being interesting.

II.

Now here you are, Sisyphus,
backing your stone up,
up, up the hill.
If he passes by here,
curse whatever smarmy asshole said
it's the journey, not the destination.

III.

Play a sad song
for the god of lost data
and hope for the best.
If he lets you leave his domain
with a whited-out temp file
floating like a ghost against your screen,
don't turn back to
scratch your head in bewilderment, no,
never look a miracle
in the eye.

— Peter Chiykowski

AT PALOMAR

Rick Wilber

Rick Wilber's interest in Moe Berg in all his various realities comes from a lifetime association with baseball and with science fiction. Rick's father was a Major-League player and coach and a pennant-winning manager in the Pacific Coast League, so Rick grew up in places like the old Comiskey Park in the Southside of Chicago and the PCL ballparks in California. In a long career as a science fiction writer he's so often touched upon baseball that he was asked to write the Baseball entry in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. Rick's novel, *Sweepcast,* will be out in early 2014 from Tor. It's volume one of a trilogy based on his long-running S'hudonni Empire stories—most of which appeared first in this magazine.

September 30, 1943

Baseball is a game of constant disappointment. You swing and you mostly miss. You think it's an easy grounder and it bad hops you. You're called out at third trying to advance on a single. The pop foul to end the game drifts away from your glove as you reach over the rail. One thing after another, one game after another, one season after another: all of this in an endless progression of childish mediocrity.

No wonder he was depressed. Surely there were better things to do with one's life than catch and throw and swing a stick at baseballs.

Moe Berg, M.S., M.A, Ph.D., LL.D., was a well-educated man, a scholar, a man of great promise. Yet here he sat, a baseball player, in the dugout at Comiskey Park watching the rain fall and gather into puddles atop the tarp that covered the infield. All over the world Americans were at war, trying to turn the tide against the Japanese and the Germans, trying to keep the world free, fighting and dying with their allies. But Moe Berg, with flat feet and a heart murmur, was still playing baseball, a kid's game. It was shameful.

The puddles rippled in the wind, tiny oceans getting wider by the second. It had been raining steadily for a half-hour and then moments ago there'd been a bright bolt of lightning and an immediate and massive crack of thunder. And now it was really pouring. Surely the game would be called in the next few minutes. Moe stood up from the dugout bench and walked up the well-chewed wooden steps that led to

the field. He held out his hand to feel the rain, then poked his head out to take a look at the stands. Nearly empty except for one woman in the box seats just to the right of the dugout. A real looker. Red hair, dark, under that black umbrella; she was staring at him, not ten feet away. Smiling.

He knew her, he thought, from somewhere.

The two hundred-inch Palomar mirror, fifteen tons of it in its wooden casing on a straining flatbed truck, was inching up the side of the mountain at two or three miles per hour. You could walk it faster, Moe knew, since that's what he'd done the day before, picking his spots, starting up at the observatory site and walking downhill a good five miles. Funny who he'd met on that walk.

In front of him, out over the flat plains of the coast toward Oceanside and the ghost town of Camp Pendleton, he could see through broken clouds as both air forces circled warily. The Republic of Mexico's brand-new German jets, ME 262s nicknamed Muerte Rapida by the Mexicans, were armed to the teeth and hoping for a mistake by the Republic of California's old P-38s, which circled and waited patiently for the huge H-6 flying boats to arrive—a flock of spruce geese—for the supposed big flyover during the ceremonies. If things went wrong and one of those wooden flying boats strayed into Mexican airspace, it was game over for the Californians.

Hell, it was a miracle, Moe thought, that the game wasn't long lost already. All this chaos and yet the Californians had somehow managed to finish the construction of the observatory building and get the mirror for the damn thing this close to being installed. All that despite the ease with which the Japanese took Northern California and Oregon, the collapse of California's allies with the ruination of New York City by the German superbomb and the surrender by the Federal States after the second bomb took out Boston; the rise of Mexico with the help of the Germans, the mobilization of everyone and everything in the Republic of California to try and hang on to independence.

And right smack in the middle of all this trouble the Caltech team kept working on the observatory, the great dome slowly rising like some Christopher Wren cathedral, a sort of St. Paul's to science, the dome a statement about who the Californians were and what they could create.

And the heart of their creation was the mirror. Even as Russell Porter and Fritz Zwicky worked atop the mountain to build the observatory, down in Pasadena, in a small warehouse, the key man to this whole thing, a guy named Marcus Brown, had been carefully, inch by inch, layer by layer, shaping and polishing that mirror to the required level of perfection.

The huge Pyrex disk had first emerged from a daring pour at the Corning Glass Works in upstate New York in the Federal States in March of 1934. From there a special train took it along the south shores of Lakes Erie and Michigan and then across into the Western Republic and through the Mormon Territory and, at last, over the Sierras and into what was then the most prosperous nation in all of North America: The California Republic, which stretched northward from Tijuana all the way to Coos Bay.

The world went to war in 1936, but Marcus Brown didn't care. He shaped. He polished. Japan's Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere succeeded at Pearl Harbor and then the First, Second, and Third Yokosuka SNLFs made their landings at Eureka and Arcata in California, and held on and grew inland to Redding and north to the border with the Republic of Oregon, before settling down to occupy and tame their winnings—and through all that Brown kept polishing. Drained by the battles to the north, the California Republic gave Mexico the port it wanted in San Diego and redrew the southern border. And Brown kept polishing. The German superbomb

was anchored to the bottom of Jamaica Bay, in sight of the Empire State Building, by the U-365; and when it went off and that mushroom cloud enveloped Gotham, Brown kept on polishing. Same for Boston Harbor, only this by the U-545. And Brown polished.

By then, in Occupied New England the Corning Glass Works were focused on camera lenses and baby bottles for the fraus of Aryan Europe and only tiny, worthless Ireland remained free of the fascists while, in Pasadena, in the warehouse at the edge of the Caltech campus, Brown, yes, kept polishing and shaping. What began with the huge grinding machine and a slurry of carborundum and water became, over the years, tiny, careful swipes with the small polishing tool, a process so delicate that after a few minutes of work Brown would have to sit back and wait for a couple of hours for the heat from the polishing to fade before taking a measurement and then doing it all over again. And again, getting the great mirror to one-millionth-of-an-inch precision. Infinitesimal corrections and improvements. Polishing. And polishing. Until today, when in the pre-dawn hours the perfect mirror, the two hundred-inch disk, was carefully, carefully, carefully loaded onto the wooden bracing on the back of the Aerocar flatbed truck and started on its way to Mount Palomar, to the top of the mountain, where the great telescope's machinery, all gimbaled and balanced and ready, waited for it.

The Chicago rain washed out the game with the Yankees in the third inning. From the White Sox point of view this was a good thing. Babe Ruth was on the mound for the Yanks, and you don't spot the Babe a four-run lead and expect to come back and win the damn thing. It would have been Ruth's twentieth win for the season. Damn Yankees.

Moe had showered and was putting on his clothes—straight-legged trousers, a nice drape-cut suit-coat, white shirt with cufflinks, a blue tie, all of it very Cary Grant—when Wild Bill Donovan showed up, walking into the clubhouse like he owned the place. Moe remembered Donovan as the U.S. Attorney in Buffalo, a straight-shooter who'd made his name during Prohibition in that shootout with Machine Gun Kelly in Black Rock, the place in Buffalo where the Erie Canal meets the Niagara River. The perfect place for smuggling Canadian whisky across the river from Fort Erie and onto a barge canal, and from there, all the way to New York City.

Kelly ran that smuggling business. William Donovan was determined to stop him. Kelly had a Thompson submachine gun and, that night, so did Wild Bill. Kelly stepped out of the warehouse for a smoke. He'd been watching his men load the canal barge with the whisky and the work was boring. It would be another hour before the barge was full and could start heading toward Albany and the Hudson and, ultimately, New York City. As Kelly stood in the shadows of Niagara Street and lit his cigarette, Donovan got out of his car and made a point of slamming the door of the Hudson.

Kelly looked up, saw Donovan, and brought his submachine gun up to point in the G-man's direction. Donovan stopped, brought his Thompson up the same way, and the two men, without saying a word, paused for a few long seconds and then let it rip. When it was over, Kelly's body had thirty-six holes in it. William Donovan was untouched and untouchable, and had himself a new nickname.

Moe was playing for the Buffalo Bisons back then, so he sure knew the story. He'd been honored when Donovan had taken him out to dinner a few times at Lorenzo's on Pearl Street, right around the corner from the ballpark. Pretty funny dinner, too, with that steak and potatoes and, surprise surprise, some good, solid Canadian whisky in that private back room. Moe liked the guy.

"How you doing, Moe?" Donovan asked as he walked up to him.

"Fine, Mr. Donovan"—who liked to be addressed that way—"and how is it with

you? Sorry about this rainout today, but the way Ruth is pitching we're probably lucky we didn't have to play."

Donovan pulled over a wooden folding chair and sat down, cap in hand. He leaned forward, talked in low tones. "Moe, I'm not here to talk about baseball."

Funny, but Moe had a good idea what this was about. There was a thought, a wisp of memory, niggling at him. Come to think of it, hadn't he seen Donovan pretty recently? Something about the war?

"Moe," Donovan was saying, "I know you were turned down for service."

"Twice, Mr. Donovan. Flat feet and a little heart thing. And I'm a professional ballplayer, mind you, and my feet haven't bothered me there. It was damn embarrassing. Hell, I even appealed."

"I know, Moe. I've seen your records. The appeal was turned down."

"All right, so I can't enlist. So what, Mr. Donovan?"

"Here's what, Moe. I have an offer for you. A way to get involved in this war. A way to fight the Nazis."

Damned if this all didn't sound familiar. It was coming back to him. He and Donovan had talked about this before. But years ago, in a restaurant in Buffalo? Not possible.

Donovan rose from his chair. "We need you, Moe. It's important. It's likely to be dangerous work, but you're a patriot, I know it, and this is something that has to be done. I'm hoping you're the man for the job."

Moe smiled. This was all a little familiar. But damn right he was the man for the job. No more kid games. No more balls and bats and running around. "Sure, I'm in, Mr. Donovan. You know I want to do my bit."

Donovan reached into his front lapel pocket and pulled out a business card. "All right, then, Moe," he said, handing him the card. "Tonight, eight o'clock, at the Drake Hotel. You'll find out everything you need to know. I hope to see you there."

The card said "William Donovan" on it and nothing else. There was a room number—PH1—scribbled on it. So a penthouse at the Drake.

"Okay, Mr. Don . . ." Moe was starting to say as he looked up; but Donovan's back was turned to Moe and he was walking away, back toward the clubhouse door. All right then. This was it. The chance to get into the fight. Finally.

Moe quietly finished dressing and then put Donovan's business card in his front pocket. There was another card in there, one the batboy had delivered from that woman in the stands. "Piccadilly Hotel. 5 P.M. in the bar," was written on it in blue ink, nice handwriting. Good timing, actually. A couple of hours, a few drinks with that woman and maybe make some arrangements for later, and then take the El north from the Piccadilly to the Drake. No problem. No problem at all.

Miriam Ruggiero was tapping Moe on the shoulder. "Say," she said, "you the reporter?"

Moe turned up the collar on his coat and nodded. It was getting colder and darker, a few clouds drifting over this side of the mountain. It might rain in a few minutes. Hell, at this altitude it might even snow. "Sure," he said, "I'm the reporter."

She was wearing a light blue jersey knit dress with a jacket over the top and carrying a beaded clutch purse. Very sporty. Moe knew about her, and suspected she knew about him, so this was all a sort of inside joke before all hell broke loose. But Moe played along when she smiled at him and said, "I thought so, just from the way you're looking things over. But I don't see any notepad, or a pencil or a pen. Or a camera for that matter."

He reached into his inside coat pocket and there, right next to the little Beretta he'd aimed at Werner Heisenberg and then, later, more successfully, at Carl

Weizsäcker during the last assignment, was his reporter's pad, narrow and with the paper hinged at the top so you could scribble and flip and scribble some more. He'd spent a little time every day over the past week, since he got out here, taking notes and working on his scribbling skills, so he'd act like a real reporter when it mattered. It was no sillier a thing to learn, he thought, than swinging a thirty-three ounce piece of lumber at a moving fastball, or figuring out how to get the first-baseman's mitt into the right place to pick up a short-hop ball thrown by the acrobatic Luke Appling from deep in the hole. Moe wondered if there was a Luke Appling in this place, and if there was, would he recognize Moe if he met him?

Moe decided to scribble and flip some for her, pretending he didn't already know her name, playing along. He opened the pad and grabbed his pencil stub from his shirt pocket and looked at her. "I'll get the photographer later, but as long as you're so interested, let's start with this. What's your name?"

"Mary," she said, "Mary Smith."

"Sure," he said, and didn't even write it down. "Mary Smith. And you're from Smalltown, USA, I bet, right?"

"You got it," she said, and she snapped open her clutch, reached in to grab a cigarette and began to light it. It was just catching when they both heard a grinding of gears from below and she stopped as they walked over to the edge of the mountain road and looked down. The flatbed was down there, struggling up the incline that led to the switchback turn and then up toward where they stood. Miriam Ruggiero was a fascist, a real fan of Benito and his pals, and now she was working for the Germans, making sure the special package that had been added onto that tractor-trailer this morning back in Pasadena got where it was going. Moe was there to make sure something else happened instead.

Light rain started falling. It was damn cold. The woman had told him that would happen and she hadn't often been wrong. What the hell was her name? Jesus, he didn't forget things like that very often, but in her case his memory got slippery. She'd told him her name, he was sure; but he couldn't think of it. Too many changes, at least three, since he'd talked to her in Oakland.

There were maybe a hundred spectators gathered at the intersection on the road where Moe and Miriam Ruggiero waited. The road up the mountain took a Y at this spot, and if you went left instead of right you went back down the mountain on the narrow, old road. Take the right instead of the left and you went uphill another half-mile on the new road and you were at the construction site for the Mount Palomar Observatory.

In about twenty minutes the big flatbed with the two hundred-inch mirror on it would slowly amble along and they'd all be standing by the side of the road getting a good close look at history as it passed them at two miles an hour. There might be sleet by then, sometimes that's how it went, the woman in Oakland had told Moe. He believed her.

The sleet would make it all trickier and it was complicated enough already. Moe had to take control of that rig and get it back down the mountain, down that narrow old road with its tight turns and steep grade. Halfway down the mountain there was a quarter-mile of flat plateau and there he'd be met and he'd hand over the rig to some Californians who would unhook the big mirror and leave it behind before taking the rest of that cargo down onto the flatlands below and Lake Hayward. If the Mexican Muertes didn't get them. If the old P-38s could hold them off. Too damn many "ifs." But that was the plan. It might work out. It could.

Moe pushed open the glass door to walk into the Abbotsford Bar in the Piccadilly Hotel and there she was, sitting alone at the small table in the back corner.

Moe liked the bar, a nice Southside place on Blackstone Avenue. Moe knew the hotel and stayed there sometimes. A couple of the Sox players lived there during the summer.

She wore a nice little mauve hat with a feather on it, and a long skirt with a white blouse, long-sleeved even in the August heat. She had on a pair of glasses and the color of the frames matched her hat and the skirt. She looked good.

He walked up to her and she smiled and said, "Hello, Moe. Nice to see you again."

"You ever going to tell me your name?" he asked. He remembered more of it now. It was coming back even as he looked at her: Heisenberg, Weizsäcker, the Hindenburg. Moe had been involved in that somehow, had done some shooting and, he thought, killed someone for the good of the cause. Something about a Nazi superbomb? Hidden in that huge zeppelin? Yeah, it was coming back. But how the hell was that possible? He played baseball for the Chicago White Sox. He had flat feet. Until he'd talked with Donovan a couple of hours ago the damn war had been going on without him.

Again that smile of hers. Nice teeth; perfect in fact. And the glasses didn't look like they were doing anything particularly useful for those brown eyes. Moe suspected her eyesight was just fine. "We knew you'd begin to remember it, Moe," she was saying, "and we have another situation that you can help us with."

He didn't remember it all yet, but it was coming back fast. And he didn't recall anyone—her or anyone else—ever explaining how things changed all the time, how reality kept shifting around. He thought maybe he didn't want to get too involved with this woman, no matter how good looking she was.

"I have a meeting at the Drake tonight," he said, "with a Mr. Donovan. So I'm really damn busy and I don't think I'll be able to help you this time." But then he was thinking about that bomb, and remembering what good pals he'd been with Paul Scherrer, the Swiss physicist. Hell, he'd stayed at the guy's house, gotten to know the wife and kids, liked it there, liked it just fine. It was coming back. More of it.

She could see that, could see the light bulb burning a little brighter in Moe's memory. She reached out to touch his arm and there was that brief moment of nausea and then here they were, still in the Piccadilly Hotel, but the woman wasn't wearing a hat or any eyeglasses, and the blouse was blue, and she was looking at him as he realized the changes. He looked toward the bar. "Harry's," it said across the top of the mirror. So that was it, step one. It had gone that way last time, too.

"We're on the ten P.M. Super Chief out of Union Station, Moe, heading west, out to California. It will take us a couple of days to get there and we'll need those days to get you ready. You all right with that?"

Was he? He hadn't been so sure a minute or two ago. But now, remembering, he said, "Sure, I'll go pack my bags." Donovan could wait a week or two.

But she only smiled again at that and nodded to a spot behind him and when Moe turned to look there was a nice valise, brown, a little worn from hard use. He reached down to pick it up by the handle. Full.

He had a lot of questions; about where he was and where he'd been, about time and travel and how come he seemed to be back where he'd been before, about who she was and whom she worked with and why they kept coming to him for help. He remembered now that she'd promised to answer some of those questions the last time they'd worked together.

He turned back to look at her. She smiled, shook her head no. "On the train, Moe, that's where you'll get a few answers."

Sure, he thought, and didn't believe a word of it. But on the other hand, he was either lying to himself or he was ready to do something serious with his life, get involved in the war finally, put a stop to playing a kid's game. And working for Donovan might be fine, but if he didn't show there tonight there'd be other people

who would. There were plenty of guys with flat feet who spoke some languages, and Wild Bill would find them. Plus, the woman was a looker. A real looker. So, thought Moe, stick around in Chicago and field some groundballs, turn some double-plays, maybe work for Wild Bill Donovan. Or do something a little more worthwhile? Right here. Right now.

Oh, hell. Easy decision. "Ready when you are," he said.

"Time to go, then," she said. And they did.

The cold drizzle was making the road slick already, though it was too warm to freeze. As Moe and Miriam Ruggiero stepped back from the precipice she slipped, and he grabbed her by the elbow to keep her upright. Pretty damn ironic considering what he had planned for her in about fifteen minutes, but he figured maybe it was supposed to all happen a certain way. It hadn't gone the way it was supposed to the last time in Zurich, when he'd thought he was supposed to kill Werner Heisenberg to end the Nazi superbomb program, and instead he shot that bastard Carl Weizsäcker; but maybe that was why he was here. Things hadn't gone right and so he was now in the repair business, fixing things. Or maybe the train business, getting things back on track. Shit. Whatever. All he could do now was focus on the task at hand and do what the woman, or whatever the hell her name was, had told him to do. Two shots into Ruggiero's chest, that's what she'd said.

Miriam Ruggiero thanked him and they got to smooth ground and stood there, quiet for a few moments. Moe reached into his pocket and got his fingers around the comforting shape of the cold Beretta. Ruggiero had to die, and Moe had to do it. Well, people were dying all over the planet because of fascists like Ruggiero, getting rid of one of them—especially this one, especially here—was just fine. That little pistol had done the job for him last time during the fracas with Weizsäcker. Moe had looked at Weizsäcker lying there in the cold grass of December, dying, and hadn't felt bad about that. Then he'd turned to see Werner Heisenberg climbing the ladder up to the control car of the Hindenburg. The bomb—the only bomb that the Uranverein had been able to make in that reality—was huge and oversized and not all that powerful, but it fit into the great zeppelin's main hold and if it went off as planned by Heisenberg it sent Hitler and Goering and the others to Hell and that solved the problem in that place.

But not here, Moe thought as he turned his back to the cold mountain air. Not here.

"You'll be a good reporter, the way you love newspapers," the woman said to him as she sat in the sofa seat in the corner of their first-class Pullman sleeper room and watched Moe spread out the *St. Louis Dispatch* over the carpeted floor.

"Newspapers are clean and fresh, that's all," he said as he carefully lifted the center table and slid the sports page underneath it. The front leg of the table fell smack on Babe Ruth's face when Moe let the table back down. That felt good.

They'd taken a taxi from the Piccadilly to Union Station, then walked right to platform eighteen where the Super Chief hummed with anticipation. So did Moe. Ballplayers didn't ride first class on the Super Chief, that was for sure. On the three or four trips he'd made to the West Coast with the Sox for exhibitions, they'd been on the old El Capitan, the one where the porter came by and folded down opposing seats to make a bed for you. An uncomfortable bed, at that. Leave at midnight from Chicago and get to L.A. thirty-six hours later after two nights of bad sleep, then play a day-game against some PCL team. That's what cheap ownership got you when you made it to the big leagues. Low pay, no comfort, no wins.

But this? This was traveling.

"So what's the assignment? " he asked, settling into the second chair and going through the ritual of opening up the bottle of red wine—a California Merlot—that stood on the table.

She didn't answer as he got the cork out, poured two glasses and handed her one. Then she took a sip. "We're a few steps away from the real thing and while I can't tell you too much too soon, you're going to be a reporter for the next couple of weeks, working for the Chicago *Post*."

"There is no Chicago *Post*. They'll know that in California, you know."

She shrugged, smiled, and leaned over with her glass, clinked it against his. A moment of nausea and he knew things had changed, but he couldn't see what was different yet. "Sure there is, Moe, and it's been the top paper in town for a hundred years."

Moe sipped on his wine, a bad Chardonnay, and set it down on top of the paper. Damnit. He looked at the woman: "Look, don't you think it's time you told me your name? At least your first name?"

She sat back, took a sip of hers. "In time, Moe, you'll get over that whole idea of names. For now, for here, you can call me Clarissa. I'm Clarissa Berg. I'm your wife."

There was a polite tap on the door and then it opened. A beefy Negro with a nice smile stood there, dressed in one sharp uniform; blue slacks and a blue coat, shined black shoes, a high collar. He wore a porter's cap, with that stiff top. He touched the bill of that cap and said, "I'm Frederick, your porter. I thought you folks might like the evening paper. You doing all right in here, Mr. and Mrs. Berg?"

He handed Moe the paper. Chicago *Post* it said on the masthead at the top. "Ruth Hits Three Homers" was the headline underneath that and the picture showed the Babe, at least some fat version of the Babe, stepping on the plate. Interesting.

"We're doing fine, Frederick," Clarissa said, "and we wonder if you could arrange a little dinner for us in here. Steak, maybe? A couple of New York strips, medium rare, with baked potatoes and some red wine, maybe a Merlot. Around nine?" And she handed him a tip, some folding money.

"Of course, Mrs. Berg," Frederick said, sliding the tip into a small front pocket. "I'll be back with your supper at nine. Y'all will love the steak. Chef Geoffrey is famous for his steaks. Otherwise, you all need anything you just press that button there," and he pointed to the porter button near the door, "and I'll be right here in a jiffy." And Frederick backed out, the door snapping shut behind him.

There was a moment of nausea, that usual brief flash, as Moe reached over to grab the bottle of wine and pour himself another drink. He wished it was a nice Irish whiskey—Paddy perhaps—but it was now a Chablis and that would have to do. It might help settle his stomach.

Clarissa was looking out the window into the evening fields of Illinois. Corn, ready to be harvested. Every now and then what might be a field of soybeans.

"Not much to see out there," Moe said as he sat down and took a sip of the wine.

She sat back. "Yes. Flat Illinois. All those crops dying in this damn drought."

Moe noticed the rain had stopped. The White Sox and the Cubs and the Cardinals had all been fighting with the rainy Midwest weather for more than a month. What drought? And then. Oh, yes. "We've already switched tracks once, I take it?" he asked her.

She nodded. "And there will be a few more before we get out West, Moe. It's a tricky path we have to take to get you and me where we need to be by the end of next week."

"You know I could use some more information on that, right? Some details? I take it this has something to do with Heisenberg and Scherrer and those guys? The German superbomb? The Uranverein? I thought we had that all done, you and me. All that stuff with Zurich and the Hindenburg and the Eagle's Nest. Last thing I recall was Heisenberg climbing into that zeppelin and heading to Hitler."

She sat back in the little sofa seat. "I'm betting you know who Erwin Schrödinger is, Moe, right? I'd think your Ivy League education included a little something on him."

Moe nodded. "Sure. I met him, actually, in Dublin, back in that last place, when I was prepping for the big meeting with Heisenberg. Nice enough guy. And I liked his wife and his girlfriend both."

She looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"They all lived together in a comfortable flat on Merrion Square, courtesy of the Irish government. Wife and girlfriend are both lookers, and very pleasant. He's a lucky guy."

"In that world, Moe, but not this one. Here, in this one, he's trapped in Berlin, under house arrest for not saying nice things about the Nazis. In some others it's even worse."

"Shame," said Moe. "I just spent the one evening with them all but I liked the guy. Mostly, we talked about Schopenhauer."

"You're familiar with his thought experiment on the cat?"

"Of course."

"Well, you should know then why I can't tell you too much. It's dangerous even to tell you I can't tell you too much."

Moe realized what she was getting at. Look too close, or look at all, and it forced changes. Hell, this was all tricky enough already and he didn't need to make it worse. So he nodded, and kept it at that.

"Your memory's really back now, Moe, isn't it? That's excellent, " she said. "I'm not surprised." She finished off her wine and saw the bottle was done, too. "How about we get some of that Irish whiskey that you like?" And she stood to walk over and hit the call button for Frederick.

She came back and sat down across from Moe. "You'll like this, Moe, wait and see."

She leaned back, crossed her legs, and smiled. Seconds later there was a rap at the door and she turned toward it and said, "Come on in, Frederick."

The door opened and in walked Frederick, a plump middle-aged white guy with some unruly red hair scrambling out from under the porter's cap, a kind of beret with a thin brim and a small badge in the front that had "California-Illinois Railroad" in red written around the top of the badge.

"Mr. and Mrs. Berg? Something I can do for you?"

Moe caught on quick. "A bottle of your best Irish whiskey, please, Frederick, all right? Does the bar have some?"

"I'm sure, Mr. Berg. I'll get it for you right away, sir." He paused, held out a pen and a baseball scorecard. "And Mr. Berg, this is against regulations but I hope you won't mind. Would you put your John Hancock on this scorecard for my son? We live in St. Louis, and since you joined the Cardinals he's been a really big fan of yours. All those home runs, the way you move around behind the plate, and that great arm of yours—throwing those guys out when they try to steal and all that. Well, it'd be really special if you could sign this for him. Could you make it 'To Freddy'?"

Moe smiled, said, "Sure, Frederick," and reached out to take the scorecard and the pen. "To Freddy," he wrote across the front, "my biggest fan. Your pal, Moe Berg." And he handed it back to Frederick—this Frederick—who beamed and then backed out of the room.

Moe looked at the woman. "So it looks like I'm still Moe Berg here. You still Clarissa?"

She shook her head, patted the spot next to her on the sofa seat, and said, "You are always Moe, it seems, my friend; that's one reason you're able to do the job. It's a gift, this ability to hit start over and over again. It's a gift, and you have it."

"Lucky me," Moe said.

She smiled. "That's debatable, I suppose. But you are important, Moe, never forget

that. The whys and hows of your involvement are difficult to explain; but we know we need you. In a week, in California, you're going to see a woman who needs to be stopped and you're going to use your Beretta to do that. If she succeeds, that version of reality will fall back into war—an atomic war—that's already killed hundreds of thousands. Without her death, many millions will die, most of them Californians. The ripples of that may change other versions, other places; perhaps my version, perhaps some of yours. So this is a job that must be done and you're the only one, we think, who can do it."

"And why is that? Why am I the only one?"

She looked out the window, staring at telephone poles flicking by over the prairie. "You're different, Moe, from the rest of us. We have roots, we have a place where we're from, a definite place, each of us. You? You seem to crop up anywhere and everywhere."

She reached into her purse. "Here," she said, handing him a cardboard baseball card. A Bowman card from 1941, in color, with a nice drawing of Moe making a backhanded play at shortstop. "Moe Berg" was the imprinted autograph across the bottom of the front.

Moe flipped it over and there were the details of the career he hadn't known he'd had in the Pacific Coast League, in black ink on white cardboard. At the top it said "Baseball Picture Cards" and then below it was: "Moe Berg, shortstop, Oakland Oaks, Pacific Coast League, weight one hundred-eighty-five, height six-foot-one, bats right, throws right. Switched from the Missions to the Oaks in 1939, hitting .292 and driving in seventy-six runs. His eighty-three hits were good for a total of one hundred-thirty bases."

All of which was well and good. It was nice, Moe thought, that some version of him did well in the PCL. "Says I'm a shortstop," he said to the woman.

"You are, Moe. Or you will be by the time you get to California."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," he said. And then he sighed, shrugged. "So," he asked her, "where and when do I kill this woman?"

Tomorrow was the day that the big mirror was going to be trucked from Pasadena to Mount Palomar, so today was the day that Moe Berg went for a nice stroll, walking down a secondary road on the mountain; a steep little road with tight turns. It was going to be a hell of a ride getting that big rig down that road to Lake Hayward.

Nearly an hour into the walk and after several miles of steep downhill, Moe reached the long flat stretch they'd told him about. Here, if he made it this far, he'd meet the Californian troops who'd take the truck and its cargo off his hands. He'd get out of the cab of the truck, hand them the keys, watch them drive off and hope to hell they weren't getting strafed by those damn Mexican jets: Muerte Rapida, indeed. Then he'd walk ten minutes back up to the logging road that led to the little shack where the woman would meet him and together they'd head somewhere else, some other version of Palomar; somewhere, he hoped, a little safer than this version.

The P-38s had a job to do holding off those ME-262s so the big Hughes H-7 seaplanes could land on Lake Henshaw, four of them in four different places on that big lake to make it hard for any Mexican paratroopers to pull off a raid. And then one of those mammoth Hercules seaplanes would carry that cargo away and the others, with dummy loads, would do the same. Moe didn't know where they'd take that superbomb and didn't care; he figured to be long gone in some other California by then, maybe one that still was part of some kind of United States.

It all sounded pretty iffy. Too damn iffy. But then what choice did he have?

He looked around. There was plenty of room here, and just off the pavement was a wide stretch of flat, packed dirt under some trees. That would help.

He was thinking it through, picturing in his mind how it would go, when he heard some rustling in the woods. Moe put his hand in his coat pocket to put his hand around the comfort of the Berretta. Were they onto him? Would this be the Germans? The Italians? The Japanese? Jesus, too many damn bad guys.

But it wasn't any of those. Wild Bill Donovan—not *the* William Donovan, Moe guessed, but another one—stepped out of the shadows of the cedar and oak trees and came over to him. "Hello, Mr. Berg," he said. "You enjoy your walk?"

It was damn hard to keep track of things. The Wild Bill that Moe knew from the first time around was nowhere near here. Hell, even the one from that clubhouse at Comiskey a few weeks ago wasn't this one, couldn't be this one; that was all three or four changes ago now.

"Mr. Berg," Donovan said, "I was told you'd be here," and he reached out to shake Moe's hand. "I'm Donovan. William Donovan. I work for the California Republic's Office of Strategic Services."

Moe nodded, said "Mr. Donovan. Nice to meet you."

So it was clear that this particular William Donovan hadn't met Moe Berg before. And he was still a spy boss, but now in California running things for the Republic.

Moe wrestled with the implications, decided to play it dumb. "And what can I do for you, Mr. Donovan?"

Donovan smiled. "We've had our eye on you all week, Moe. We're wondering why a local guy, born and raised in Southern California, would be working for the Federal States."

"That's not who I'm working for, Mr. Donovan. I'm a ballplayer, you probably know that."

"And I'm your biggest fan, Moe. When I lived in Sacramento, back when it was ours, I used to watch you play for the Oaks when they came to play the Solons. Hell of a hitter for a shortstop, Moe."

"Thanks," Moe said, but didn't believe a word of it. Donovan had looked that up, but this version of the guy didn't come across the same friendly way the version of Donovan that Moe knew back in Chicago did, or the one farther back in D.C. This one seemed like he was hiding something. He seemed dangerous.

"I had some streaks, Mr. Donovan. Had some slumps, too. It all evens out, you know."

"Evened out to a two-eighty-six batting average, Moe. Damn good for a guy with a slick glove at short and that cannon of an arm."

Moe smiled, nodded.

"But that's not why I'm here, Moe. We can talk baseball, I hope, some other time. I understand you're a pretty smart guy, Moe. You're Doctor Berg, really, right? Got that doctorate, that law degree from Stanford. You really know your stuff, right?"

Moe nodded, said, "I enjoyed going to school, I guess, Mr. Donovan."

"That and playing baseball, right, Moe? Funny, a guy like you playing ball in the PCL."

"I don't think it's funny, Mr. Donovan. It's something I enjoy and I'm good at it."

Donovan stared at him, shook his head. "You went to Japan twice with the oaks, Moe. In thirty-five and again in thirty-six."

Moe nodded. He knew this was where this conversation had to be going. Back home, in the reality he was from, he'd gone once to Japan on a tour with the White Sox. He'd taken a few pictures. Maybe some of Tokyo Harbor. Maybe some other ones, too. So he'd done the same thing here, apparently. Well, all right. He could ride this horse if he had to.

"The Japanese really love their baseball, Mr. Donovan. PCL teams go over there every year. Yes, I was lucky enough to get to go twice."

"Did you play ball the whole time, Moe, or did you do some sightseeing while you were there?"

"We were pretty damn busy, Mr. Donovan. Double-headers most days. Lots of ceremonial things going on. We didn't get a chance to be out on our own very much."

"You were out often enough, Moe. That's what I think. And you speak Japanese, too, right?"

"I get along in it, Mr. Donovan. That and French and Hebrew; Italian, too. Spanish. I have a facility for languages."

"And German?"

"Yes, and German, too. You accusing me of being a spy, Mr. Donovan? Are you serious about that?"

"No, no, Moe, quite the opposite. You're not working for the Germans or the Japanese or the Eyeties or the Mexicans. I wouldn't believe that of you. You're too much of a patriot." He smiled. "But we can sure see why the Federal States would want you in their stable. Guy like you: sports hero, speaking those languages, a bright guy."

"I'm not working for the Federal States, Mr. Donovan. I'm a ballplayer. That's all."

"Sure you are, Moe, pacing off a mountain road in the middle of nowhere where an important load will be coming tomorrow. You know this is the wrong road for that, right?"

"I'm out for a walk on a sunny day, Mr. Donovan."

Donovan walked over to get close to Moe. Stood toe to toe with him, put his finger on his chest, said, "We're watching you, Moe. We've been watching you and we'll keep watching you."

"Sure you will," said Moe, and thought about the Beretta in his coat pocket. He wondered if Donovan had anyone else with him, someone still hiding in the woods. Did he have to kill Donovan right now? Here? And then check for anyone in the woods?

Donovan pushed hard with that finger. "Moe, the Republic of California has big plans for tomorrow. We have someone on the inside of the German spy machine, a woman, and tomorrow is her big day, tomorrow she finds revenge for what the Nazis did to her family. You understand? You get in the way of those plans and you're a dead man. You got me?"

So that Miriam Ruggiero was a double agent. Should he still kill her? He didn't know.

Moe reached and took Donovan's finger from his chest, pushed it aside. Maybe this *was* the moment. He could push Donovan back, trip him, maybe, and then pull the Beretta out and shoot the son-of-a-bitch right here and be done with it. One more threat. One more hint.

But the moment passed. Donovan backed away, raised his hands in a mocking surrender. "Sorry, Moe. I didn't mean to get that touchy, all right?"

"Sure."

"So I'm asking nice now, okay? Leave it alone, tomorrow. Save yourself and your friends some grief and just leave her alone."

"I hear you, Mr. Donovan."

"Good," said Donovan and took one step toward Moe, leaned his way. "Stay out of trouble, Moe. We're watching you." And then he turned his back to Moe and walked away, back across the pavement and into the woods. Had a car in there, no doubt. And maybe a partner.

Moe watched the man's back move away and thought about the Beretta. He'd gone through a lot of training with handguns for the job involving Heisenberg. He remembered practicing with the Beretta, in particular, at Scherrer's house in Zurich. He'd been good, damn good, with the gun. He reached into the pocket, got his right hand around the Beretta, pulled it out of the pocket, gave it some thought and then,

as Donovan disappeared into the trees, Moe took a breath, nodded his head, put the Beretta back into his pocket, and turned around to walk back uphill.

On the train, they talked through much of the night, Moe and Clarissa, eating the cheese sandwiches that Frederick brought back with the Irish whiskey. After a while, Moe had a good feel for what he was supposed to do. It all made sense as long as you kept thinking about falling dominoes. That's how she explained it; a long, long row of upright dominoes and once one of them started falling the whole row went. And her world, and Moe's, were in that row and down they'd go.

Unless something, unless someone, got in the way.

Eventually, about four in the morning, the woman said they had to get some sleep, so they buzzed Frederick—still the same Frederick, too, to Moe's surprise—and he set things up so that Moe slept on a pull-down bunk and the woman on the nice bed that folded out from the back wall. Moe's little bed was too small and too hard, but he didn't mind, it beat the hell out of trying to sleep cheap on the train from Chicago to Boston to play the Braves, which he'd done too many times.

They were up by eight and into the dining car for breakfast. Two eggs over easy with bacon and toast for Moe. A couple of pancakes for the supposed missus. Coffee, black. Clarissa spent the two bucks plus tip on the nice breakfast spread for the both of them. Pricey, but the food was good. Then it was back to the room and back to work.

She did most of the talking as they arrowed straight west through Missouri and Kansas and onto the flat high plains of Colorado. The scenery was so bad they pulled down the blinds for a while and turned on the lights and talked in general terms about how things were. In the California they were going to the Germans already had the superbomb, so it was too late to stop that, and the world wasn't at war anymore since the Japanese and Germans had about everything they wanted.

Except for America, where the Japanese were clearly angling for all of the West Coast while the Germans itched to break the pact with Japan and make North America theirs for the next thousand years. Fascist Mexico would be the proxy, using German weapons and with German officers and with a very ambitious Generalissimo O'Rourke, he of the Irish heritage but the Mexican ambitions. An excuse was all that was needed.

All of which might well happen if Moe didn't get the job done as she outlined it. He thought it was something he could do. Would do. No question. And she smiled when he said that, shook her head slightly, said, "There are too many possibilities, Moe, too many paths. But we have to try, and you're the man for the job. I'll help when I can, where I can. But all the twists and turns . . ."

She let that thought trail off, sat back into her cushioned seat, stared at Moe. "Whatever happens, Moe, just try and get where you have to be and do what you have to do. I hope to be there to help."

"Hope?" Moe didn't like that choice of words.

She nodded. "You never know, Moe. Just get there and take care of things. Don't let that bomb explode. We're counting on you."

She reached out to touch his hand. She smiled. "You always seem to get it done, Moe, in a lot of different places. There'll be a moment there when it could go wrong. I can't tell you more, but you'll make the right decision. You and that Beretta. Two shots to her chest. Do that, get it right, and a lot of important dominoes are still standing."

"But you're coming along, right?"

She nodded, said, "That's the plan." And sat back again, lost in thought.

They rode in silence for long minutes, Moe watching the Colorado scenery go by out the window. They were in the mountains now, the tracks carved out of the side of

the mountains at times. Other times, they wound their way through river valleys that had done the carving long before steam engines arrived.

The last time Moe had seen mountains was in Switzerland, in Zurich. That seemed a long time ago now. Funny how he'd damn near forgotten about that whole thing, though at the time it had been about the most exciting and worthwhile thing he'd ever done. Beat the hell out of baseball.

The woman was napping, despite the improved scenery, and Moe finally nodded off himself, too. Fifteen minutes was all. Then back to work.

But the hard flash of nausea—a feeling he knew too well now—brought him upright after just a few minutes of closed eyes. The woman was gone, her book lying there on the table. The train felt different, the rhythm had changed.

They were rounding a big curve and slowing some. The whistle blew. It sounded breathy. Moe leaned over and looked out the window. They were in the same wide river valley they'd been in before and Moe could see the front five cars and a coal car there, at the front, a huge steam engine pulling them along, smoke pouring out the stack. He hadn't seen one of those in years. Well, be damned. He sat back. He suspected she was gone; wasn't in this place anymore, this version of things. She'd warned him that might happen. He wondered if he'd see her again or if he was on his own now. He wondered if it mattered.

Moe stood on the wet-slick road and listened to the big rig's engine strain as it worked its way up the slope. He looked around for the woman. She'd said she'd be here. She'd promised that, in fact, and yet the moment was almost here and there were a couple of hundred people standing by the side of the road and over in the parking lot of the gas station and its café and not one of those people was her. The whole week in Los Angeles, knocking around, checking things out, using his press credentials to get into the workshop at Caltech; he'd been looking for her, expecting her to show up again after that conversation in Oakland. But nothing.

Maybe, Moe thought, he was in the wrong reality? Maybe he needed a lot more nausea? The woman had said she'd be here, hadn't she? He took a deep breath, thought it through. Maybe, in fact, she hadn't made any promises. Maybe she'd just said she'd hoped to be here. Maybe he was on his own. Maybe that was the point of the whole thing.

Now here he was coming down to the final few minutes of this little drama and Moe didn't know for sure if what she'd asked him to do was still the right thing at the right time for this place, this *here,* this *now.*

Thing was, it felt right. In his gut, that same gut that wrenched at him each time he shifted from one version to another, he felt this was it.

The California Republic was playing nice with the Japanese Occupied Territories here, just like it was supposed to. The emperor's own son, Akishino, was here, ready to cut the ribbon on the big Subaru telescope, and that too was right. It was Japanese money that finished the observatory, it was Japanese expertise that built the housing for the big mirror that was coming on that truck. That, too, was spot on. And all of this was pissing off the Germans who wanted California for their own, for the West Coast ports they needed for their navy, Moe was guessing. For that the Germans were willing to set off a superbomb that would take off the top of Mount Palomar and start a war to clear the Rising Sun out of California. Hell, they probably had a superbomb in Tokyo Harbor ready to go off right now, too.

He looked down the road and there, maybe five hundred yards away, was that big Aerocar flatbed trailer being pulled along by the overhead cab. And on that trailer was the mirror, the two hundred-incher, polished to perfection, maybe the only remnant in this time and place of the technology that the old United States once had.

The big rig was down to a mile or two per hour, straining to make the climb. Moe knew why. There was an extra ton of weight on that flatbed. A deadly ton. Hidden under the tarp. The device—the superbomb—he had to do something about.

And he was ready. Mr. Eveready, Johnny on the spot. SuperMoe. Two shots to the chest would do it. He looked around. No woman. No Donovan either. Well, that was all right. He knew what he was supposed to do and he was ready to do it. Hell, might be fun.

And then it started to fall apart. A kid who'd been looking at him earlier, wearing a Hollywood Stars ball cap, grabbed his pal by the sleeve and came over to Moe and said, "Say mister, ain't you Moe Berg, the ballplayer? Hughie and I think you are."

"I didn't say it, you did," said Hughie, who looked bookish and quiet but stood up for himself.

Moe didn't have time for this, but couldn't draw any attention to himself, either; so there was no pushing these kids out of the way. Play nice for another few minutes. "No, kid," Moe told him, "you got me confused with someone else. Sorry."

But the kid, twelve or thirteen, at that age where he was starting to think he knew things, was dead certain of them, said, "You *are* Moe Berg. I saw you play for the Oaks. I told Hughie, you were playing shortstop and then you went and hit a homer against us and scored on a play at the plate to win the game. That was two years ago, in August. That knocked us out of first place. You really gave those homers a ride; I'll say that."

"Sorry about that, kid," Moe said. He had no recollection of that at all, of course. He hadn't even been there. In fact, he was starting to figure out, it hadn't actually happened at all until he, Moe Berg, had shown up in this version of reality. He'd arrived and then, instantly, there was a whole history of Moe Berg, Pacific Coast League ballplayer, Oakland Oaks shortstop. Moe Berg who had always been there, who'd played for years in the PCL, who had a personal history that included being born in Sacramento and raised in San Jose, and going to college at Stanford and getting that law degree and a Ph.D. to boot, and then throwing all that education away playing baseball, a kid's game, an inconsequential career in an inconsequential league in an inconsequential sport.

And now he was here, all the tiny drops of rain becoming rivulets of action coming together into larger streams and rivers and lakes and oceans of reality, until Moe Berg, ballplayer, was talking to this kid who'd seen him play, seen him hit home runs, knew for a fact that there was a Moe Berg here and always had been.

It was dizzying. Here. Now. Back a few doors, back in Chicago, back with the White Sox: was that Moe still there? Was that possible? He didn't know.

Not that it mattered, whether he knew it or not, whether he understood how it all worked. Here was the deal. He was here and had something to do and these kids were here getting in the way of things.

How to clear this up? "All right, kid, you got me. But I'm trying to stay out of the spotlight, you know? I'm just here to see the big mirror get up to the observatory. I'm an astronomy fan, kid, that's all. So let's keep it quiet that I'm here. All right?"

Moe looked at Hughie, who nodded yes. He looked at the other kid, whose eyes had opened wide. Now the kid thought he was being included in a Big Secret. He nodded his head. "For sure, Mr. Berg. Honest. I'll keep it quiet." And he looked around slowly. "I don't think anyone heard me, okay?"

"That's great, kids," Moe said, putting his finger to his lips and saying, "Shhh, right?"

Both kids nodded, committed now to secrecy.

Nice kids, Moe thought, looking down the road to where the big flatbed was slowly inching its way upward, still a good ten minutes or more away. Time enough, sure-

ly, to help them out. So Moe said, "Say, how about I sign your cap there?" to the outspoken one. The kid smiled a big old grin. Moe had pushed the right button.

"What's your name, kid?" he asked him as the kid handed over the cap and Moe pulled out the ink pen.

"Ollie," the kid said, then shrugged. "Oliver, really. But don't write that on there. I ain't no 'Oliver,' and I can't stand the name."

Moe laughed, he knew all about not liking your first name. Ever since those damn Stooges came along in the early 1930s he'd had to put up with "Hey, Moe" and "Nyuk. nyuk" jokes. Damned annoying. "For my new pal, Ollie," he wrote, and then signed it "Moe Berg" and handed Ollie back the cap.

"Hey, thanks, Mr. Berg," Ollie said, looking at the signature in awe for a long moment.

"And how about you, Hughie? Got a piece of paper on you? I'll sign it for you."

"I do," said Hughie, quietly, and reached into his front pants pocket to pull out a little notepad.

He handed it to Moe, who saw it said "Hugh Everett" across the front. "You want Hugh or Hughie there, young man?"

"Hugh, I think," the kid said, and so Moe signed it "To my pal, Hugh, from your pal Moe Berg," and handed it back.

"That okay, now, guys?" Moe started to ask, but before he could even get it out of his mouth the two of them had turned to run back across the road to where a couple of parents stood patiently, smiling. Well, hell, Moe thought, I made the kids happy, so the day won't be a complete waste no matter what.

Sure.

Miriam Ruggiero, the fascist, the double agent that Donovan had his plans for, had watched all this, a little smile on her face. As Ollie walked away she came back over to Moe, said, "So you're really a ballplayer? I knew you weren't a reporter."

He wasn't going to say no to that. What the hell should he say? Listen, doll, I'm a spy, just like you? Only while you play both ends against the middle I travel through different versions of things trying to work my way to the One Big Fix that will bring all of you down, all you ambitious, petty, nasty, cold-blooded, vicious fascists. All of you. Down.

No, he chuckled to himself as he half-listened to her. Behind her babble he could hear the gearbox straining on the flatbed, just four hundred yards away now.

Or maybe, he thought, he could tell Ruggiero that there's this woman I like. I want to make love to her. She's gorgeous, and smart enough I can talk with her, and I bet she makes love like a train wreck, so the sheets are all scattered and in knots afterward, and the pillows are over there and the blankets I don't know, and who's on first and what's on second. Would that work, telling her that? Sure it would. Right.

Instead, he said, "Yeah, I'm no reporter, I'm a ballplayer. A shortstop for the Oaks. You a fan?"

"Not really," she said, and then asked, "A team is named after a tree?"

Moe smiled. Small talk for a few more minutes and then all hell would break loose. Good, he was ready for that now. But where the hell was the woman? Clarissa or whatever the hell her name was. Not that names mattered, she said.

He could hear the groan of the tractor-trailer as it struggled upward and toward them. Another one of those clouds from out over the plains below had drifted their way and it was raining a little harder; a cold, steady drizzle now that gathered into droplets on his coat. He turned up the collar.

The kid, Ollie, was standing with his parents. His pal, Hughie, was off to the side a bit. Ollie's mom was a nice looking woman in a dress, so her legs were showing on this cool day near the top of the mountain. She wore dark nylons and Moe wondered

where she'd gotten them. Did the stores in the California Republic actually have nylons to sell? Moe hoped they were keeping her warm.

She was wearing a warm coat and had a hat on, a little feather rising from the hatband. Very snappy. Dad was dressed in a business suit that he didn't look comfortable in. Also with a hat, a nice fedora, getting coated now in the thickening mist. Moe recognized that face from somewhere.

Ollie saw Moe looking his way and waved. Moe nodded back, wishing he hadn't looked. He didn't want to encourage the kid.

But, damnit, he had. Little Ollie started walking Moe's way, tugging his parents along, pal Hughie trailing along behind. Damn. He didn't want them around. In about ten minutes that tractor-trailer with that superbomb hiding under the tarp was going to go right by him and Moe had a job to do. Right here.

Little Ollie and his entourage made it across the road. "Hey, Mr. Berg," he said, "this here's my parents, and they'd like to meet you." He took off his ball cap and pointed at the inside of the front bill. "I showed them this great autograph."

Ollie's mom reached out her gloved hand to shake Moe's. "That was very gracious of you to do that for the boys, Mr. Berg. Thank you so much."

Dad did the same, giving Moe a good, strong handshake. "Yes, Moe—can I call you Moe?—that was very nice, thanks. I watched you play against the Stars a number of times. You always seem to hit our pitching really well," he said, and smiled.

"Sure," Moe said to him, "call me Moe. And thanks, on the hitting." He shrugged. "You know how it goes with hitting, some of them drop in and some of them don't. Just lucky, I guess, against the Stars." Truth was, Moe had no idea how he'd done against the Stars. Damndest thing, to have a history and not know it.

And then it dawned on Moe who this was he was talking to. "You're Marcus Brown, aren't you?" he asked him.

Sure enough, just like she'd said in Oaks Field the last time he'd seen the woman, here was Marcus Brown, right in front of him. The guy he had to keep alive while he was making sure others were dead.

Moe knew the story, had read about it on the train down from Oakland to L.A. Brown had been just another blue-collar guy in Pasadena, looking for work, when the disk first arrived from Corning, and he was hired as an apprentice to help with the long, hard work of polishing that rough mirror down to the perfection it needed to be the greatest telescope the world had ever seen. Over time, he fell in love with the work. His attention to detail and his ability to get totally absorbed in the careful work of polishing pushed him up the ladder in terms of responsibility, and he became, in a few years, the man in charge. The polishing took six years, the work so delicate that once it neared the end Brownie—as he was known—could only polish a small patch of the mirror before the heat generated from that hand-polishing meant quitting for hours or even for the day.

But finally it was done, and now he was here to see his labor rewarded with the installation of that mirror into the great telescope, the Subaru telescope finished with funds from the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Republic of California's new pal in a forced marriage. Japan. The Rising Sun.

Moe guessed Brown planned to bring the wife and son and pal along and walk next to the big rig up the last thousand yards to the top of the mountain and the cranes that would take the mirror from the trailer and drop it gently and neatly into its cradle inside the huge dome of the observatory.

But Moe was there to make sure things went a certain way, and that way wasn't Brownie's. There was a superbomb involved, and an ambitious Mexico that didn't know it was being set up, and a Japanese territory to the north that was in for one or two big surprises, and, of course, the Germans. And Ruggiero, working one side or the other.

And so Moe Berg was going to have to ruin Brownie's day.

It hadn't taken Moe long to realize things weren't going exactly as the woman had said they would. Hell, he'd felt that pulse of nausea another couple of times on the train ride and watched the train's steam locomotive change back to diesel and then back again to steam before he crossed the border at Reno and bought his ticket for the narrow gauge up and over the Donner Pass and down the western slope of the Sierras to Lodi, a boomtown now that Sacramento was in Japanese hands. There he got back on the bigger train and headed over to Oakland, in the Republic of California.

San Francisco was in Japanese hands, but the Californians had hung onto Oakland and now there was peace—of a kind—which was obvious as the train wound its way through the golden hills and down on into Oakland. Moe was on the right side of the train and as they neared the Sixteenth Street Station he could see out his window that great broken bridge heading west over the bay where it ended, eerily, just after Yerba Buena Island. The Japanese had, in two years' time, dismantled their side of the bridge, making a statement about the permanence of the separation between Occupied California and the Republic. Two huge zeppelins, they looked like sister ships to the Hindenburg, but wore the rising sun on their tails, were moving out over the bay. One looked like it was heading toward the Golden Gate, which stood serene and whole in the distance, and the other was coming in to dock somewhere along the San Francisco piers. Were there daily flights to Japanese-held Hawaii? Probably so, Moe thought. It was a very different war here. Or had been a different war. Too bad.

At the train station twenty minutes later, Moe got out. It was noon, and while he needed to get down to Los Angeles, he needed a break, too. He'd been cooped up on that train for nearly forty hours, and that was enough. And since he had a week to prepare for what he had to do down near the border with Mexico, he might as well spend half a day here.

He looked up at the timetable. There were trains heading down to L.A. every two hours or so right up to the sleeper train at midnight. His ticket was good for all of those, including the first-class sleeper. No beautiful mystery woman to share it with, but what the hell.

So it was lunch, dinner, and some sightseeing in Oakland, getting a feel for how it was living up here right on the border with the Japanese.

It wasn't a big train station, despite having transcontinental trains come in five times a day, so Moe's walk across the tiled floor of the station was a short one, past the coin-operated storage lockers and then the twin newsstands. The *Chronicle*'s stand was empty now since the city across the bay was Occupied Territory and Moe supposed that the stationmaster was keeping it there, empty, as a reminder of the current realities.

Moe walked out through the big glass doors and onto the broad front steps, and stood there for a moment to take in the view: that beautiful bay and there, in the distance, fog-bound Japanese San Francisco. In Oakland the sun was shining.

Moe figured the ballpark was only a couple of miles away and it was a lovely day for a walk, so he headed in that direction, but when he got to San Pablo Avenue an electric trolley pulled in right in front of him that was headed the right way, so he stepped aboard, handed the conductor a nickel and got his ticket in return, and found himself a seat. In three stops—maybe fifteen minutes—he was there, the trolley stop across the street from Oaks Field.

He was unlucky and the Oaks were out of town, but the ballpark was open and he walked in through the turnstile and up the broad central ramp that led to the stands. When he got to the top of the ramp he stopped and looked around in the bright sunshine. In front of him were fifteen or twenty rows of box seats, painted

bright red. Beyond those folded seats was the field, and there were sprinklers going in the outfield, chugging around to spray the grass in big overlapping circles of water. The infield looked pretty good, major-league quality; hell, that even looked like Georgia clay out there, though that seemed unlikely. He walked down to the front row, went to his left to get past the screen, and stepped over the low wall to walk onto the field and out toward the batter's box, where he paused for a second, and then took one more step right onto home plate. Both feet firmly planted.

It was all unreal in its normalcy. This was it, home plate, the center of it all, the focal point of baseball. You swing a stick and hit a ball and you run and run until you come home while the other guys try to stop you.

Moe stood on the plate to look around. The field. The green grass, the bases, the perfection and imperfection of every bit of it, from pebbles in the infield that cost you a game to the perfection of leaning into a good pitch and watching it soar out over the players, the outfield, the wall, the fans: right out of the ballpark and bouncing down the street from there, not stopping until some lucky kid saw it rolling along and grabbed it and had himself a baseball.

He looked down the lines at first and third. The baselines, faded now on an off day, ran out to infinity. Funny that, the idea that beyond the outfield wall the lines kept going, widening all the time, taking in, ultimately, the whole damn planet.

And to each side of the plate the batter's boxes—messy and faded now before the next home game when they'd be re-sprayed, prettied up, confining the hitter, making him stay in that little box and deal with what the pitcher could deliver.

It had only been a couple of days and already Moe missed the game. He'd thought he'd had enough of it, wouldn't miss it a bit; but the feel of the glove on his hand, the handle of the bat in his grip, the sound of spikes on wooden walkways from the clubhouse to the dugout. The guys, the childish and silly and wonderful guys who were his teammates.

He heard a chair slap open behind and turned to see the woman there—back at last from wherever the hell she'd gone—sitting down in the first row of the box seats behind the screen, directly behind home.

She waved at him. He shook his head, but left home plate and walked over toward her.

"The fascists, Moe, and the Japanese."

"What?"

"You're such a kid, Moe. Forget about baseball, all right? Think about the fascists; you know, Hitler and Mussolini? Think about them and about Tojo and his emperor. Think about the absurdity of Japan occupying most of Northern California."

"What are you talking about?"

"Think about those things and think about home, Moe. Your reality. The war going better now that Patton's in charge of the invasion, the new Spitfire jets that England's factories are cranking out, the way the Germans pulled back across the Channel after they couldn't hang onto their toehold in Sussex. Things are turning around in Europe, don't you think?"

Moe had read the Lodi *News* on the way to Oakland. He knew how the war here was going, and it was terrible. But she had better news, news from a few places back, a place where he was from. Things couldn't have changed too much since he'd left that behind.

"Rommel will never give up Cairo," Moe said, "and the way the Russians collapsed like an empty sack? Hell, the war could go on for years."

"But the Germans there don't have a superbomb, Moe, and that's because of you. Dominoes, Moe. All those dominoes."

She stood up, walked over to him. "The war is going even better elsewhere, Moe. There are places where Hitler is dead and the Germans are asking for peace. And

places where the Russians stopped the Germans cold, and where Rommel failed at Tobruk and never made it to Cairo."

He'd seen enough changes now to realize that was probably true. But then everything seemed to be true somewhere.

He shook his head. "So where have you been? And how'd you know I'd be here, in this damn banjo-hitters' ballpark?"

She just smiled at him and he realized that was a stupid question. He might be a long, long way from home—wherever that was—but he was still himself. Of course he would get to the ballpark.

"Look," he said to her as he unlatched the gate that blocked access to the field from the front row of the box seats, "it's time you told me exactly what you need me to do, all right? I know you say you'll be there, but things don't always seem to work out how you expect them to, you know?"

"True enough," she said.

"So for all I know I'm going to blink and you'll be gone again. Forever maybe, or for five seconds and then you show up in different clothes and your hair a different color."

"All right, Moe," she said. "You're right. And you know there are things I can't tell you, things we don't want to have change on us, right? But I'll do what I can to get you ready, Moe." She turned around to walk back to the seat she'd been in. She sat down, opened the folding chair next to hers, patted the seat, said, "Come on, Moe. Sit down here. It's time to talk about the next week of your most interesting life."

All right, Moe thought, about damn time. He stepped up into the stands, leaving the field behind, and sat down next to her.

"Moe," she said. "For starters, and this is important, it has to be two bullets to the chest."

Moe nodded. "Got it," he said. But his stomach felt a little queasy.

Marcus Brown was talking to Moe. "In thirty-nine," he was saying, "I was there with Ollie and Hughie the day you ran right over the catcher on that play at the plate to beat the Stars. Do you remember that play? It was quite a collision. Ollie still calls that the most exciting baseball play he's ever seen."

Moe smiled. He'd learned some things in Oakland earlier in the week and now felt more comfortable in the skin he was in here. "Sure I remember, and it hurt like hell. Mickey Kreitner was catching. He's a tough guy."

Brown shook his head. "Mickey died in the Battle of Redding, you know. Tragic."

"I know," Moe lied, "and I was sorry as hell to hear that. I liked him. He was a hell of a ballplayer."

Brownie smiled, shrugged, said, "It's been terrible, hasn't it? And yet here we are on this mountain, and this observatory will be famous all over the planet and somehow we Californians got it done. It feels good."

Moe didn't mention the Japanese help. And it *was* something, and it was pretty damn funny how Moe was starting to feel that really had been him in thirty-nine, scooping up groundballs and running the bases like a wild man all season long.

"You know," Moe said, "the truth is I wasn't having all that great a season. But Riley kept throwing me fastballs inside and I kept hitting them out. We won, I think."

"Yes, you did," said Brownie. "I actually took the day off from work to see Riley pitch that day. I do believe he won twenty games that year."

"A day off from working on the mirror? To watch a ballgame?" Moe smiled. "I'm honored that baseball matters that much to you."

"It doesn't, really," said Brown. "But Ollie wanted to go, and his pal Hughie lives down the street with his grandparents and we like to do nice things for Hughie, so a ballgame now and then is the least we can do."

The background noise of the big diesel engine on that Aerocar tractor-trailer changed pitch as Moe listened to him and turned to look. Jesus. He'd been talking baseball with Marcus Brown when this world, this reality and a lot of others, hung in the balance. The big rig had rounded the last corner and was just fifty yards away, straining to make the final grade, straining to pass right by them in the next five or ten minutes.

There was a polite tap on Moe's shoulder. It was Miriam, asking to be introduced to Brownie, asking if she could stand with them as the great mirror went by. She was holding that clutch of hers, the little beaded aqua-colored handbag. Moe guessed there was a gun in there, something small, so she'd need to be close to the target.

The big rig was fifteen yards away now, but barely inching along. Moe, the Brown family and Hughie, Miriam Ruggiero. How long should he wait? Until the cab and the driver were right next to him? Yes, the fork in the road was just beyond that point, so he'd struggle to keep the rig in gear long enough to make the left turn and start going downhill. There'd be trouble, for sure. Even with Miriam dead or dying there'd be others, probably Donovan and his pals who were lurking back in the crowd. They'd have their own guns. Damn.

Moe could see the driver through the windshield. Ten more yards now. Damned if it wasn't a woman behind the wheel. Damned if it wasn't *the* woman, Clarissa or whatever her name was. How'd she do that? Well, hell, that ought to make it easier to deal with Ruggiero and hijack the damn mirror and its bomb.

Five yards. The kid, Ollie, was so excited he was jumping up and down. Hughie was standing still, looking around, keeping an eye on Moe. Brownie himself was grinning and applauding, his wife holding onto his right arm, proud of her man, happy for her son. Everyone was applauding. Miriam was opening up that clutch. Behind the windshield the woman driver wasn't smiling, she was looking at Moe.

Moe felt a warning twinge in his gut. No, damnit, not now, but then came a major cramping, wrenching bout of nausea and Moe closed his eyes for a moment, a second or two, and when he opened them the road was there but the crowd was gone and the sun was shining. Oh, hell. Moe spun once and there was little Hugh Everett standing there, wide-eyed, looking at Moe looking at him.

No! Moe tried to find the moment again, tried to bring it back, tried to change it, and sure enough there was another wrench, and they'd changed. Still no crowd, no Aerocar tractor-trailer, no big mirror, no bomb. But, sure enough, there was the Everett kid, stock still, staring at him.

Another wrench, a hard one, and then it felt right. The crowd was back, the big rig just a few feet away. Too much going on, too many questions, but Moe had to act and so he did, reaching into his coat pocket to get a good grip on the Beretta, pulling it out and turning to face Miriam Ruggiero and glad that he was already aiming at her chest since she was pulling her own gun from that clutch, had it halfway out.

Moe pulled the trigger and there was a click, no more. Misfire. Miriam had hers out now and was bringing it up to shoot when a form came out from her side and hit her in the hips, a nice collision, a play at home plate that jolted her, sent her arms flailing as she pulled the trigger once, twice, before she lost balance completely and went onto her back, firing a third time straight up at the gray sky.

It was Ollie, the kid who'd just made the most important play of his young life. Behind him came both parents, Mom reaching for her child, Brownie reaching for Miriam and her gun and grabbing it before she could fire again, then starting to kneel on her as Moe turned around to get to the cab of the big rig.

There were two holes in the windshield, a foot apart, and inside the woman, Clarissa, was falling forward onto the steering wheel as Moe watched it all happen in slow motion. He ran for the door of the cab, pushed the button to open it, swung it wide and climbed up the two steps that got him next to the woman.

"Go," she said. "Moe. Go," and he did that, pushing her across the seat to the passenger side, seeing as he did it how the blood was already starting to flow from one hole and there, a foot away, from another hole, the fabric of the jacket smoking from the heat of the slug that had torn its way through and into the woman.

Moe climbed in, the engine stalling, and stepped on the pedal and felt the rig shudder and then catch as he got seated and grabbed the wheel and tried to see through the shattered windshield as he reached up to pull the horn cord and started steering left and hoped to hell that people were getting out of the way. Out the left window he could see Brownie and a couple of other guys holding the Ruggiero woman down. She was still alive, and that was too bad. Next to Brownie was little Hughie Everett, his eyes on Moe, taking it all in.

A few seconds later Moe had the rig turning left and cresting the little hump where the old road met the new one. Over it and then downhill and, still working the horn, he had it going downhill, shifted up a gear and then another to get some speed and, suddenly, he was in the clear, heading down the road he'd walked yesterday, heading down to the meeting place, heading down to the Californians and bringing them the superbomb. He had a few minutes, he hoped, time enough to get where he needed to be before the Mexicans brought their fast death his way and blew him, the great mirror, and the superbomb all to hell.

He looked over at the woman, who was slumped on the seat. She didn't look good.

She managed to raise her head and look at him. She managed to smile. Ten minutes, that's all they should need. Ten minutes and then they'd leave all this behind and with any luck when they made the shift to the new place she wouldn't have a hole in her chest.

"I'll make it, Moe," she said to him over the grinding of the gears as he dropped it back one gear to keep control.

Sure she would. There was a sharp curve to the right, then a steep downhill straightaway, then another sharp right and then he'd be there, they'd be there, on that quarter-mile of wide, flat road. Five minutes? That would do it.

He made the curve, relying too much on the brakes and not enough on the gearbox. He could smell the brakes overheating. Not good, not good.

Straight ahead at the moment, out over the plains that led to the ocean, Moe caught a glimpse of the P-38s wheeling, trying to take on the Mexicans, dying in the trying of that but buying him time. He didn't see any of the big Hughes flying boats.

Time. And changes. That was all they needed, the two of them. A few minutes and a useful change. That nausea and something different, a better place. A place with no fast-death jets.

Riding the brakes down the steep slope, he tried to downshift but couldn't find the gear so he went back up to where he'd been. She moaned, over in the passenger seat. He stole a quick glance. Blood, way too much blood. Damn it.

Into the final curve, the brakes smelled like he was burning up a house, but slowed the rig down enough. Just enough to hold onto the shoulder as they went—too damn fast—around that final curve and there was the stretch he needed. And men in uniform there, even Will Bill Donovan, the son-of-a-bitch, standing there grinning with a pistol in his hand. Two men manned a big fifty-caliber machine gun and the rest of them stood with their rifles aimed up, shooting at something. Oh, hell, a 262. Had to be. Muerte Rapida.

He wiggled the rig back and forth, trying to be a moving target until he got to the wide spot, where he pulled right, stood on the brakes, shifted down and down and down once more and the rig slowed and slowed again and then, the brakes crying and burning, he was there.

"That Everett kid okay, Moe?" she asked through her pain. "Tell me the kid is okay."

"The kid is okay," Moe said. Donovan was running their way, one hand raised to shoot his pistol into the air—wasted effort—and the other hand holding onto his hat.

"That's good," she said, "real good. The kid matters, Moe. I couldn't tell you before."

She winced, but then looked at him and smiled. "It's going to be all right, Moe, I swear. Here we go. Right now." She reached over to take his hand and Moe grabbed it for dear life, hanging onto her as they heard the scream of the Mexican jet behind them coming in for a strafing run and saw Donovan coming their way and the Californians firing that big fifty-caliber and, maybe, an oomph from behind him and maybe the men at that machine-gun were starting to raise their hands in joy when there came a moment of nausea, a wave of violent convulsion in the pit of his stomach: worse than anything he'd felt before any other shift, and it all went dark and he wondered, as he faded away, if he'd ever wake up from this one. ❍

NEXT ISSUE

AUGUST ISSUE

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's thrilling August 2013 novella plunges us headlong into "The Application of Hope." Captain Tory Sabin developed a system for searching for faster-than-light space vessels years after her father's craft was lost. Decades later, she must use that system in a desperate race against time to locate her lover's ship in the treacherous and unknown reaches of foldspace.

ALSO IN AUGUST

Jack Skillingstead folds time and space together to give us the quietly moving "Arlington"; **Gwendolyn Clare** transports us to a distant planet for a harsh look at "Stone to Stone, Blood to Blood"; **Gregory Norman Bossert** follows artists engaged in a strange casting of "Lost Wax"; while two children in **Leah Thomas's** first tale for *Asimov's* must try to rescue their father from "The Ex-Corporal."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg has taken upon himself the enviable chore of "Rereading Simak" for his August Reflections column; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net asks "What Counts?"; **Paul Di Filippo's** On Books examines the works of Peter F. Hamilton, Tim Powers, Kit Reed, and others; plus we'll have an array of poetry that you're sure to enjoy. Look for our August issue on sale at newsstands on June 11, 2013. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at *www.asimovs.com*. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader, *Zinio.com,* and from *magzter.com/magazines!*

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Zita Repeata

In the issue of this magazine dated January 2012, I touted a stellar YA graphic novel by Ben Hatke titled *Zita the Spacegirl* (2011). As I write, it's still 2012, and I get to rave now about the sequel, *Legends of Zita the Spacegirl* (First Second, trade paper, $12.99, 224 pages, ISBN: 978-1596434479). I hereby declare 2012 to have been a really good year for spacegirls!

If you recall the scenario: plucky young Earthgirl Zita, accidentally teleported offplanet and into a churning, complicated galactic civilization, performed heroically during a crisis, but ultimately remained stranded among aliens, lacking a special crystal to return her home. But she's not friendless, hanging out with a roguish human male named Piper, her giant sentient mouse buddy Pizzicato, and a few other pals.

Our new book opens at an indeterminate point after the conclusion of its predecessor. To survive, Zita is reduced to freak show status, handing out autographs under Piper's carny barkering, and trying to live down her fifteen minutes of fame. By chance, along comes a little junked robot, the Imprint-o-tron, which takes a fancy to mimic Zita. At first, Zita sees the chance to pull a "prince and the pauper" routine, and escape her responsibilities. But her fun and games go awry. Robot Zita takes her place with Piper, leaving Real Zita stranded. Just when an alien race called the Lumponians needs her to fight off an invasion of Star Hearts. Can Robot Zita do the job of a true hero? Will flesh-and-blood Zita ever reunite with Piper and her entourage? Will the Doom Squad of Judge Dredd-like cops nail her first, for spaceship theft? And what of Madrigal, star gypsy, and her giant cat Glissando? Friends, foes, or something in between? The plot twists and turns, leaving the reader continually guessing, until an exciting climax. (And also a cliffhanger; hurry up, Hatke, with Volume 3!)

Hatke does superbly here everything he did in the first volume. The storytelling is top notch: sophisticated and speculative, silly and serious by turns. Zita's characterization remains endearing and believable. The subsidiary characters all have their trademark quirks that allow them to serve as likable and admirable foils. The enigmatic relationship between Piper and Madrigal remains a deliciously unplumbed mystery.

On the art front, Hatke's designs for the assorted aliens, humans, robots and animals remain a fount of alluring fecundity. The fabled "Cantina" scene from *Star Wars* has nothing on a less-clichéd Hatke. His panel arrangements all conduce toward a smooth reading experience. And sometimes, as on pages 82-83, where he spreads out across two pages, he goes for effective widescreen fireworks. I don't believe I mentioned in my prior review how wonderful the colors are, too. A palette that ranges the spectrum from subdued to eye-popping. It must also be said that Hatke is suitably indulgent with a fair amount of "gratuitous" (read, essential) eyekicks, in the manner of the best Will Elder comics. For instance, you might be so entranced by the departure of Zita's little spaceship on page 49 that you fail to notice a giant dead (?) robot sprawled across a plateau below her. Hatke never boringly explains this stuff, either, trusting in the imaginations of his readers to fill in the blanks as they wish.

Oddly enough, in this totally G-rated book, I flashed at times on the work of R-rated Vaughan Bodï , in such SF books

as *Sunpot* and *Cobalt-60*. Maybe it was the slangy speech of some of the aliens that reminded me of Bodē's comics. Certainly, the styles of the two artists are not similar. But I think that Hatke shares some of Bodē's irreverent zest for life. And that's essential for a winning series such as this one.

Gryphons and Wizands and Trolls, Oh My!

British writer Peter Dickinson, now aged eighty-four, has always had a curious glancing relationship with fantastika. His career has intersected our genre many times, often quite substantially and impressively. He's won awards in the UK. But he's just as well known, if not better known, for his mystery novels, and has never quite attained a slot in the higher pantheon of SF/F/H authors, or, I would venture, in the forefront of the consciousness of many fans. Perhaps his splendid new collection from Small Beer Press's Big Mouth House imprint, *Earth and Air: Tales of Elemental Creatures* (trade paper, $14.95, 256 pages, ISBN 978-1618730381) will help change that undeservedly low profile.

It eventuates that this volume is third in a series, unknown to me. Dickinson and his celebrated fantasist mate Robin McKinley have previously released two co-authored books—*Water* and *Fire*—concerning elemental beings from those two classical realms. Lacking fresh stories from McKinley with which to partner, and seeking to circumvent his own mortality, Dickinson has chosen to go solo with his own tales from the remaining two spheres.

From the very first story, "Troll," we are plainly in the hands of a master. This narrative concern Mari Gellers, who bears ancestral nonhuman genes from some generations-past female-troll intercourse, and what happens when she herself marries and runs afoul of her lineage. Dickinson's voice in the mimetic first half of this story is supple and assured, powerful yet subtle. When the supernatural intervenes in the second half, we are perfectly primed. Dual plotlines converge, and a surprise ending tops it all. Brilliant!

The next tale, "Ridiki," exhibits the same taut, smooth, hypnotic blend of naturalism and the uncanny. A young Greek lad named Steff loses his beloved dog to a snake's bite, then finds himself embarking on a half-believed supernatural quest to recover her. Dickinson's prose does not waste a word. His understatement achieves more than any brand of pyrotechnics, proving that restraint is more effective than excess when it comes to creating an atmosphere of the weird, and conducing toward emotional identification between reader and protagonist.

"Wizand" extends Dickinson's reach, since it is a kind of science fiction/horror tale, a blend of Hal Clement and Michael Shea. In a semi-scientific preface, Dickinson reveals the existence of creatures called wizands, who throughout human history have taken symbiotic psychic possession of certain individuals—mainly those we come to call witches. In our modern era, an ancient wizand joins forces with a young girl named Sophie Winner. Dickinson follows her curious occult growth into young adulthood, when her coolly inhuman final fate overtakes her.

In "Talaria," Dickinson gets a kind of Robert E. Howard vibe going at first, which gradually transitions into a sort of Lord Dunsany fabulistic atmosphere. Early in the first Christian millennium, a slave named Varro escapes from Timbuktu. At a desert oasis he has an encounter with a mythic beast, and survives. But the Ovidian metamorphosis he undergoes leads to an unforeseen existence for him, much grander than anything he could have predicted.

"Scops" takes place in Christian Byzantium, with fairy-tale directness. A simple brother and sister, Yanni and Euphanie, come into possession of an tutelary animal familiar, which in turns opens them to the attention of the pagan gods. Then the pair must deal with an irruption of darker forces, using their humble skills to the utmost.

Finally, "The Fifth Element" ventures into pure SF territory, of the Simak or Sheckley or van Vogt kind. On a strange planet, the crew of a commercial spaceship—a hybrid mix of many species, including one Man—finds itself facing a weird threat—from within its own ranks!

This volume delivers a vast range of reading pleasure, from a writer who, despite not dwelling exclusively within our big tent of fantastika, proves himself a solid family patriarch and mage.

Bradbury in Slumberland

Although 2012 might have been a good year for spacegirls, it also took away from us the beloved Ray Bradbury, who, even at the end of a long distinguished career, was still gifting us with more work. Perhaps most significantly, right around the time of Bradbury's passing, Subterranean Press brought out *Nemo!* (hardcover, $35.00, 176 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-397-6), Bradbury's translation into film script of Winsor McCay's classic *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. The book must be approached on three planes: how well is the script written, strictly as a reading experience; how good a movie would it make; and how faithfully does it conjure up the atmosphere and spirit of the original?

By way of background, I cannot find any history relating to the composition of this work. An internal reference to the music of John Williams makes it at least somewhat contemporary. What I'm guessing is that it derives from Bradbury's well-documented stint working on the animated cartoon from 1989, *Little Nemo: Adventures in Slumberland*.

First, the writing. Most scripts (dialogue aside) are written as banal instruction sets for the director, actors, and filmmaking crew. There are exceptions, of course. Alan Moore's comicbook scripts are famous for being elaborate works of art. I would put Bradbury's *Nemo!* in the middling ranks of that superior class. It's eminently readable as sheer prose, full of patented Bradbury zip and zest and language. "MACHINERY grinds and TINKLES, PURRS and intercogs in secret stuffs." Gorgeous! Whether he intended for this script to be published widely, or just could not help exerting himself to the fullest for even a minimal audience. Bradbury does not stint or compromise on his prose. The text is full of his typical joy and relish for the fantastic.

What about the watchability of the movie that would result from this script, always assuming that talented film people did their best with it? At 176 pages, translating at the industry standard of one minute of screentime per page of script, we're talking about a three-hour film. Plainly, this script is too long. Nemo doesn't even really get to Slumberland till about sixty pages in—using up the first hour of screentime! Then, I also find an excess of chases and huggermugger, as opposed to any character development or world-building. No, purely as a cinematic blueprint, however much fun it might be to read, this script will not cut it.

But it's on the third plane that, sadly, Bradbury loses me entirely. The dreamworld he builds might be fascinating, might be primal Bradbury, full of his touchstones—but it's not McCay's creation, despite an odd moment or two that visually replicates the newspaper strips. What went wrong?

First, Bradbury attempts to give Nemo a backstory. This is precisely the wrong move. Nemo's cipher-like little boy existence allowed him to stand in for every human visitor who ever wandered nightly past the Gates of Sleep. Nemo, as we all know, means "no one," and so he should remain. Now, instead, the arc of his backstory has to be fulfilled by Nemo's adventures in Slumberland, giving them the programmatic quality McCay avoided so well. This culminates in an explicit moral on page 155.

Second, Bradbury's Slumberland has no internal consistency, no invariant geography, no sense of another ontological realm with its own backstory. It's too silly, without grandeur or mystery. Paradoxically, this venue needs substantiali-

ty, not Nemo. It has to feel more real than he is! Third, the serial nature of the comic strips is gone, whereby Nemo inched closer and closer to his ultimate destination in each installment. Fourth, Bradbury introduces a new, useless character: Omen, Nemo's doppelganger, a kind of Peter Pan demiurge. Doubling Nemo deprives the visitor from the daylight world of half his responsibilities and privileges, half his dangers and rewards. Lastly, the "physics" of Slumberland are all bent from McCay's simple yet powerful paradigm of total immersion until accidental wakening. Now they are unclear, allowing pretty much anything to happen, thus rendering everything equally consequential or inconsequential.

Many, if not all, of these defects were doubtlessly induced by the demands of the movies: certain inescapable Hollywood beliefs about character and plot. Much like the unsatisfactory movie versions of Seuss and Sendak—two creators influenced by McCay—this script cannot address nor capture the true Jungian surrealism of the original. It just evaporates with the light of day.

Meet You on the Flipside

Cat Rambo's new story collection, *Near & Far/Far & Near* (Hydra House, trade paper, $16.95, 294 pages ISBN 978-0-984301-4-5) comes with an old-school hook. It's printed in the classic Ace Double fashion—dos-a-dos, as John Clute dubs it—with half the stories, *Far*, dealing with the distant future, while those in *Near* relate more closely to the present. But of course, this packaging is merely frosting on a delicious fictional red velvet cake.

Let's start with a sampling from *Near*. "The Mermaids Singing, Each to Each" is Delany-quality speculation about marine scavengers, and in fact makes me recall "Driftglass." Weird chrono-trips are the topic of "Peaches of Immortality." Straight-up horror fills "Close Your Eyes," while Ballardian decadence informs "Real Fur." "Vocobox" read like a blend of Henry Kuttner and Barry Malzberg. And Heinleinian SF gets dragged into the twenty-first century with "Long Enough and Just So Long."

Rambo's prose is always muscular and streamlined, yet capable of poetic effects. Her plotting is tight and suspenseful. Her speculations are full of cyberpunkish intensity, and yet respectful of hardcore SF conceits. She has a love for biological tropes. Consider this description from "Memories of Moments, Bright as Falling Stars." "The Exams were the freak show I expected. Rich people buy mods and make them unnoticeable, plant them in a gut or hollow out a leg. This level, people want to make sure you know what they got. Wal-Mart memory spikes blossomed like cartoon hair from one girl's scalp, colored sunshine yellow, but most had chosen bracelets, jelly purple and red, covering their forearms. One kid had scales, but they looked like a home job, and judging from the way he worried at them with his fingernails, they felt like it too."

The offerings in *Far* are rich with exotic aliens ("A Querulous Flute of Bone"); weird social systems ("Seeking Nothing"); and disruptive technologies to which humans have made strange accommodations ("Surrogates"). Readers will savor piquant tastes of James Tiptree, David Marusek, and Jack Vance in these colorful tales.

One trait of Rambo's that needs to be remarked on here is her droll humor, not unremittingly black, but hardly light and slapstick either. The prime instance in this book is "Kallakak's Cousins," about a hapless alien running a souvenir stand on a huge space station. I'm reminded of Cory Doctorow's fabulous debut story "Craphound," but Rambo's tale is even more polished and multiplex.

This whole dual collection pleases immensely, up close or distantly removed.

Duncan Deuxième

The Pottawatomie Giant & Other Stories (PS Publishing, hardcover, £19.99, 325 pages, ISBN: 978-1-848633-09-4) is

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Andy Duncan's second book. (I'm discounting his standalone novella from PS Publishing, *The Night Cache*, since that piece is also included here.) Duncan attended Clarion, the fabled workshop for fledgling SF writers, in 1994. So, two books in nearly twenty years? Not exactly a Stephen King-like level of production, but one necessarily tied to the exigencies of holding down a day job and to Duncan's personal habits of composition. And yet, Duncan has amassed a record of superior work out of all proportion to mere number of pages gathered between boards. He feels like an essential, towering part of the fantastika landscape, his every story eagerly awaited. He's in the same league as Howard Waldrop and Ted Chiang: artists who deliver infrequently, but who tender a masterpiece nine times out of ten.

Duncan is primarily, I venture, a fabulist: a teller of tall tales, of strange unlikely fate-woven happenstances that illuminate how weird the world really is. But unlike our field's most famous such figure, R. A. Lafferty, Duncan always remains in perfect control of his meticulously shaped material. With Lafferty, one always felt that the story was being improvised drunkenly word by word, and that it might go off the rails or end up at a destination utterly unintended. With Duncan, the narrative is a powerful subtle engine hauling a battered Duesenberg down a Spanish-moss-festooned corduroy road.

A story like "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," with its fairytale hobos, is both a triumph of naturalism and fancy, along the lines of Fritz Leiber's work. "Unique Chicken Goes in Reverse," detailing young Flannery O'Connor's oddly mystical barnyard pet, fills a historical niche with glorious mystery. "A Diorama of the Infernal Regions" blends Tim Powers with Robert Bloch. The Soviet space program becomes mythic in "The Chief Designer."

And that's barely scratching the surface. This book is so full of elegant marvels that it should—and must—suffice us until the next installment of Duncan's genius. ❍

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Everybody should have their Memorial Day convention picked out. I'll be at BaltiCon. Asimovians should particularly consider KeyCon, Oasis, ConQuest, BayCon, MisCon, ConCarolinas, SoonerCon, and DucKon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

MAY 2013

9-12—**ÅCon. acon6.wordpress.com.** For info, write: **10 Hill St. #22-L, Newark NJ 07102.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) **acon6.wordpress.com.** (E-mail) info@acon6.wordpress.com. Con will be held in: Mariehamn, Åland I., Finland at the Aldon. Guests will include: T. Sullivan. "Pronounced 'Awe-Con:' truly Åsome." Supporting Helsinki 2015 Worldcon.

9-13—**MistiCon. misti-con.org.** Margate Hotel, Laconia NH. "A Harry Potter Convention Like No Other." Not officially sanctioned.

10-11—**Watch City Festival (781) 893-5410. watchcityfestival.com.** City-wide Steampunk bash, Waltham MA. Big evening events.

10-12—**Faerie Festival. marylandfaeriefestival.org. Camp** Ramblewood, Darlington MD. Outdoor event. Pony rides, May Pole, etc.

17-19—**KeyCon. keycon.org.** Winnipeg MB. Richard Hatch (Battlestar Galactica), Lee Moyer. Celebrating Dr. Who and H. P. Lovecraft.

17-19—**Spectrum. spectrumfantasticartlive.com.** Bartle Hall, Kansas City MO. M. Whelan, C. Vess, McPherson, Whitlatch, de Sève.

17-20—**CostumeCon, cc31denver.com.** Red Lion Denver Southeast, Aurora CO. Masqueraders' annual con. Spectacular costumes.

18—**Book Festival. gaithersburgbookfestival.org.** City Hall, Gaithersburg MD (near DC). "Books, Writers & the Written Word." Free.

24-26—**Oasis, Box 323, Goldenrod FL 32733. oasfis.org.** Orlando FL. Seanan McGuire, Cthulhu Chili Cookoff, NASA stuff.

24-26—**ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64171. conquestkc.org.** Holiday Inn CoCo Key Water Park. Rothfuss, Garcia, Wrede.

24-26—**Anime Boston. animeboston.com.** Hynes Convention Center and Sheraton Hotel, Boston MA. Note new weekend (2013 only).

24-26—**Anime North. animenorth.com.** Congress Centre, Doubletree, Sheraton, Crowne Plaza, all near Toronto airport (YYZ).

24-27—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. balticon.org.** Hunt Valley Inn, Hunt Valley MD. J. Haldeman, Okorafor, Sternbach.

24-27—**BayCon, Box 62108, Sunnyvale CA 94088. baycon.org.** Hyatt, Santa Clara CA. L. M. Bujold, V. Belmont. C. & J. O'Halloran.

24-27—**MisCon, Box 7721, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 544-7083. miscon.org.** Ruby's Inn. Jim and S. K. Butcher. "Family-friendly."

24-27—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-8850. wiscon.info.** Concourse Hotel. Walton, Slonczewski. Feminism & SF.

31-June 1—**ConSarnit, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959. con-sarnit@comcast.net.** St. Paul MN. Western fiction.

31-June 2—**ConCarolinas, Box 26336, Charlotte NC 28221. concarolinas.org.** Charlotte NC. Tim Zahn, W. Baur, A. Rosenberg.

31-June 2—**RelaxaCon, Box 391596, Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org.** Denisport MA. Come help plan next year's big Arisia con.

JUNE 2013

13-16—**World Horror Convention. whc2013.org.** New Orleans LA. Bram Stoker awards for horror will be given out.

21-23—**ConTerpoint, c/o 5911 Veranda Dr., Springfield VA 22152. conterpoint.org.** Gaithersburg MD. SF/fantasy folksinging.

28-30—**SoonerCon, 1848 Hemmingway Dr., Edmond OK 73013. (405) 310-9255. soonercon.com.** Midwest City, OK. Cherryh.

28-30—**DucKon, Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60189. duckon.org.** Westin Chicago North Shore, Wheeling IL. Golden Duck awards.

28-30—**ConTemporal. contemporal.org.** North Raleigh Hilton, Raleigh NC. Pirate/western/SF mashup, looks like

28-30—**BaCon. ba-con.org.** Columbus OH. "Weekend-long Convention Celebrating Geeks, Games, Tech and . . . BACON!!!"

JULY 2013

4-7—**WesterCon. westercon66.org.** Sacramento CA. Griffith, Eskridge. The big annual Western/SF/fantasy convention, 66th edition.

4-7—**ConVergence, 1437 Marshall Ave. #203, St. Paul MN 55104. (612) 234-2845. convergence-con.org.** Bloomington (Mpls.) MN.

5-7—**InConJunction, Box 68514, Indianapolis IN 46268. inconjunction.org.** Marriott East. Cherie Priest. "Strange New World."

5-7—**North American Discworld Con. nadwcon.org.** Marriott Waterfront, Baltimore MD. "The Turtle Moved!"

AUGUST 2013

29-Sep. 2—**Lone Star Con 3, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. lonestarcon3.org.** San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. $160+.

AUGUST 2014

14-18—**LonCon 3, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. loncon3.org. Docklands,** London UK. The WorldCon. £95/A,C,U.S.$160.

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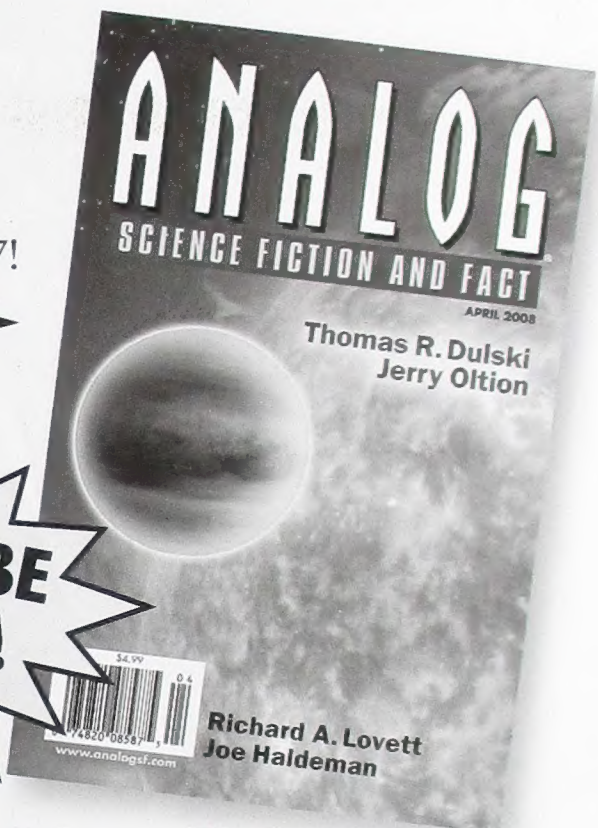

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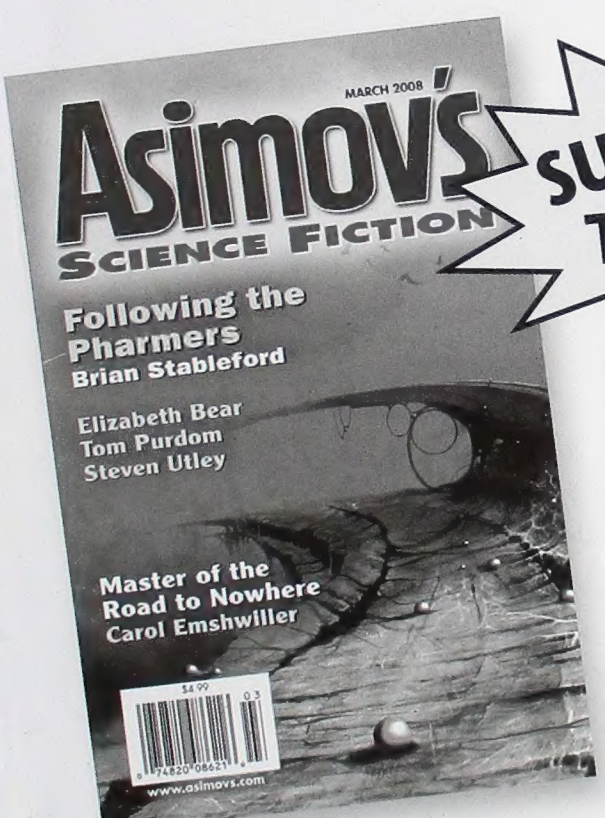

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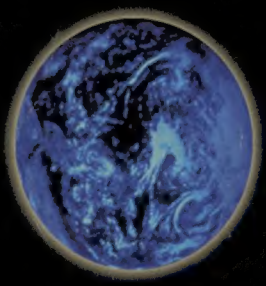

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